SHADOW UNIT

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Season 4

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Credits

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Fair

New York Downtown Hospital, New York City, NY, June 14, 2011

"We have to talk," you say, and touch Tricia on the elbow. If it hurts just being in the same room with her, touching her is like pressing your hand on purpose to a hot burner. She feels like aching love and grief and terror, the ancient animal fear of being left alone.

You know it, you know all about it, you know.

You wish to the bottom of your soul there were somebody else to say this. Somebody should be saying it to *you,* making you believe it, fighting through your denial and getting you to see the truth. You should be one of the ones hitting walls and having hysterics.

You aren't. You're the villain of the piece, and if it's not the final service you wanted to do your best friend, you know it's one she would have appreciated. Asked for, if she could ask.

You know exactly what she would have wanted.

It's not fair.

Tricia takes seconds to respond, as if the signals from your voice and touch have to travel a long way through her nerves to find her. When she looks up, leaning back from the hospital bed, the bandages and purpled flesh, you can tell from the blankness of her expression that whatever she heard, she did not understand you.

"I need to talk with you," you say again, squeezing her elbow, trying to let the chant of anxiety in her head wash through you without drowning in it.

She nods and stands, understanding without being told that this is not a conversation you can have in front of Daphne. The empty space that used to be Daphne. She follows you into the hall, and you lean a shoulder on the wall, needing the support, and try to get enough air into you to speak softly, calmly, like a reasonable human being. Not like somebody squeezing words out through a broken heart.

She's so patient with you, which is so unfair, because she has no reason to be, no reason to be kind. You'd trade places with her wife in a heartbeat. Not for Daphne, even--for you, because you are a selfish bastard and you don't want to do this alone.

But--you guess--that's what you're going to do.

Tricia looks at you, giving you time, and lets her fingertips rest lightly against your shirtsleeve. You gulp air in and try to find the words, everything you

rehearsed gone now. *So much for that eidetic memory.*

"She's gone," you say, finally, because it's all you can say, two syllables the most you can get out into the awful space between you. And you don't know what's going to happen, if Tricia is going to explode in your face and blame you (the way you are blaming yourself, with every breath that scours you out inside).

"She's right--" Tricia says, turning her head, hand reaching back to the open door of the hospital room, the denial but not the anger yet, and you shake your head and say, "She's not in there, T. I . . ."

Her breath stops, but you choke on the words for so long she gets them out first anyway. "You looked."

You nod.

"What do you mean, she's not in there?"

She's a teacher, of course. She knows the right question to ask to unlock the floodgates, and you stand there watching all her long wavy hair locked up and uncombed over her shoulders, thinking about Daphne twining a lock absently around her fingers, and you wish, you wish, you wish--

Except you don't really wish you were dead. That's the worst part. You just *wish* you wished you were dead.

You don't deserve what they had. All you care about is yourself.

True, maybe. But you can pretend it's not all about you, for a minute at least.

"She's not in the mirror," you say, very softly. "It doesn't--there's nothing to reflect. Like holding it up to see if somebody is breathing. There's not even a fog. I'm so sorry, I'm so *fucking* sorry--"

Tricia's face does the most terrible things while she works her way through that. But while you're apologizing she's squeezing your shoulder, and when you find yourself bent almost double around the pain in your gut she moves close and lets you lean on her. And that's so wrong, it should be the other way around.

"You're sure?"

You nod, but before you finish, she's already shaking her head at herself as if she's the one who's done something insensitive: Of course he's sure, you idiot. Don't be a brute.

"Oh, Platypus," she says, the only one outside of the team who calls you that. "Oh, sweetie. How many times did you try?"

"Ten," you say, turning to look at the wall. Ten, except it was five tries before you could make yourself look, edging up on her hospital bed like her hand was a viper that might rear up and strike you. Ten, because you made yourself promise you would stop after one more after nine. "T.--"

"Shh," she says, and you shh. Because you trust her, because Daphne loved her. Because she's everything Daphne deserved, and you can't begrudge either of them that.

She touches your face to get your attention back. She's crying, you're crying. She says, "I need to think about this."

You nod. It's not like there's any hurry. She's not in there; ergo, she's not in pain. Spared that, at least, if nothing else.

"I am so *sorry*."

"Me too." Tricia looks up at you. She looks away. "I need to think about this. Get some sleep or something. We'll talk about it in a couple hours."

You don't sleep, and you won't sleep, and you couldn't leave the hospital if you tried. But Tricia deserves her time alone by Daphne's side, and this isn't about you, no matter how much every breath feels like it comes out your throat dragging your intestines up on fishhooks. So you find a corner of a waiting room the team isn't in and you sit there, staring at the TV with the sound turned down, wishing God accepted trades or bargaining.

Dammit, you think once, a thought so profoundly selfish you hate yourself for an hour afterward, *it was supposed to be her burying me*. You're the one with the life expectancy that should be measured with an egg timer. You're the one who takes the stupid risks.

You're still hating yourself for it when you feel Tricia come toward you, and though you're trying not to read her you can sense the resolve in the room. She sits down on your right side and leans her shoulder against yours. Maybe this is easier without eye contact. Maybe.

"We'll give her a week," she says. "So we can all say good-bye. And in case miracles happen."

"I think you are doing the right thing," you say, because you do, and because it might someday help her, to have heard it.

She starts to say something and chokes it back, so you know it was angry. That's okay; you don't mind her anger. You suspect you deserve it.

But because Tricia is better than you, she keeps it to herself, and when she finally says something, it's soft, and gentle, and it kills your breath in your lungs and your heartbeat in your chest. "She knew how you feel about her,"

Tricia says. "And she loved you, too."

Knew. Loved.

This is really happening. It has really happened. It's real and it's over and there's no take-backs and no do-overs now. You tip your head back, because it makes it easier to breathe through the tears. You breathe through your swollen nose because if you open your mouth you'll be sobbing.

Tricia says, "Did you hear me, Chaz?"

You nod. You have to say something. You have to, for Tricia, because it's monstrous to sit here in silence when she's so brave and in so much pain.

"I wish it was me," you say, which is the wrong thing and half a lie and you want to keep saying it anyway, over and over like a chant, so you stuff your fists against your mouth and bite down on your knuckles and fold forward over your knees.

"Don't say that," Tricia says. "She'd hate to hear you say that."

She's right, so you bite your knuckles harder, and Tricia puts her arms around you and you throw one of yours around her. People walk past, doctors and nurses and aids and administrators and patients and visitors, every one of them blessing you with their selective blindness, honoring the bubble of grief that embraces you two. You hold on to each other for dear life, because sometimes that's all you've got.

Maybe that's *always* all you've ever got, and the rest of the time you're fooling yourself.

Sooner or later, you can talk again. Tricia's just tucked under your chin, not shaking anymore. You take a breath; it holds. You take another.

There's one more thing you can do, though. So you do it. Not expecting a fight, because another time Tricia's pride might drive her to do it herself, but right now it's busy holding her up off the ground. "I'll tell her father."

"Thank you," Tricia says. And leans her head against your shoulder.

Post Mortem

June 2011

Hafidha Gates is dreaming.

She stands with her feet planted solidly on the earth. She stands and watches the semi come down upon her--the irresistible force bearing down on the concrete barrier.

She reaches out--not with her hands. With her will. Into the network of linked silicon brains that control the steering, the brakes, the engine--

White smoke boils from the wheel wells with the stench of burning rubber. A horrible sound cuts the air. The trailer bends impossibly, coming around, swinging into the passenger side of the truck.

Jack knife. The perfect word. Metal crunches. The driver--already dead.

The cab of the tractor-trailer drifts to a halt three inches from her face.

"Gotcha," she purrs.

She bends forward and kisses the W in *KENWORTH*.

*

Hafidha Gates awakens, curled around a pillow, her body clenched like a fist. She chokes, rolls, just makes it over the edge of the bed before a bitter stream of bile forces its way between her teeth. She lies there for a minute, belly down on the institutional bed, gagging.

Nobody will clean that up for her.

You killed her, she thinks. *This is* your *fault.*

If you had been there, you could have saved her.

Don't you dare *feel bad.*

*

Frost doesn't mourn, not like the others. It isn't in her. And she has no plans to attend the funeral.

Hot water and harsh soap run over her hands. She scrubs, turns them, scrubs again, lathering to the elbows. *You are*, she thinks, *a sociopath.*

It's an interesting thought--it's always interesting to think about ourselves--but it's not a new one. She inspects it, turning like a cloudy jewel in the light of her attention, and sets it aside.

She rinses, and reaches for the gloves. Surgical gloves come sealed in sterile packets. The ones Frost uses come jumbled, hundreds in a box like a Kleenex dispenser.

No one to glove and gown her, here. Her patients don't care about a sterile field maintained, and honestly, there's not any reason to wash her hands before she starts the postmortem. This particular decedent will be buried in a closed casket. There's not enough mortician's putty and loving gloved hands in the world to turn this battered meat into a doll you could kiss goodnight before you slide it into the ground.

That's all funerals are. Kissing a doll goodnight. Turning on the light and fetching a glass of water before you leave the room. Propping the door open three inches behind you.

Just rituals.

Nobody cleaned her up before they put her on life support--or after for that matter. Frost wishes she could smooth the decedent's blood-spiked hair back from her brow before she starts the Y incision, anyway. As if to let her know that Frost will take good care of her; it's going to be all right.

It's not any different when it's someone you knew.

That's interesting, also.

*

The Johns Hopkins autopsy suite does not have a glass-walled, elevated room in which observers can isolate themselves from the smells and realities of a dissection. It's just as well, because Stephen Reyes might succumb to the temptation, and he needs to be here: he needs to bear witness. He walks between the six cold marble tables, toward the one at the end where Madeline Frost works, alone.

Frost has already started prepping the body. Because Worth's organs were donated, there's no need to make a new incision. She'll just have to snip open and expand the cavity to look at what remains. She'll saw open the skull. That's where all the damage was. Right now, she's washing the body. Water falls to the white-skinned corpse and, stained red-brown, flows down the table to the slotted floor.

Frost looks up. "Stephen," she says, because he's not here in a professional capacity. It had taken him a few months to figure out when she used a surname and title, and when she used a first name--but she had her rules, and she abided by them.

"Dr. Frost," he answers. "Will I be in your way?"

"Not if you stand over there." She walks around the table, still washing. A precise and factual answer, crisply enunciated and utterly toneless. He feels an unexpected rush of affectionate warmth for Madeline Frost.

There are no cloths, no bandages across Worth's face now. It looks like something you'd expect to find in a meat locker. Her abdomen is sunken, empty.

I am Eleanor, Stephen Reyes tells himself as he stands between those tables, performing the only final service he can, *and I can look at anything.*

It occurs to him that quoting James Goldman should be Brady's line, but surely Brady won't mind, this time, if Reyes is the last one out of the room. And it's true. He can look at anything. He can. He will. *You must do the thing you think you cannot do.* And that's an Eleanor, too. Eleanor Roosevelt, and that one should belong to Todd.

Maybe it's because he's not watching for his own sake, but for all of theirs. For hers. Because somebody should witness this, and somebody should remember it.

If Reyes were thinking in his own voice, he knows what words would come to mind. The ones Neil Gaiman put in the mouth of Death herself, when he made her a gentle and loving friend: *When the first living thing existed, I was there, waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job is finished. I'll put the chairs on tables, turn out the lights and lock the universe behind me when I leave.*

This is his responsibility, and that makes it his obligation. He'll watch until it's done.

When he raises his head, Frost is looking at him. She has a pair of surgical scissors in one hand. She's wearing a face shield and a plastic smock. Her skin is so pale it seems translucent, and her eyes are very blue.

"Are you sure?" she asks him.

"No," he says. "But I'm staying."

She stares, head turned over her shoulder like an owl, and then she turns away as quickly as if flicking off water. "Madeline Frost," she says. "M.D. June twenty-second, two thousand and eleven. Postmortem dissection of decedent Daphne Worth--"

*

Just a hair before midnight, New York State declares same-sex marriage legal.

So, do the morons in the New York legislature think that, before they spoke up, it was wrong? Do they imagine life is some kind of two-pole switch, and

they can declare which way it's toggled?

John Worth mops his eyes with the heels of both hands. The tears just keep welling, and spilling.

Six states. Forty-four to go.

Forty-four times he knows he's going to weep shamefully, helplessly, at a loss made new and unbearable once more.

He thumbs the volume up on the television remote to drown out the sound of his sobs in the empty house.

*

There is no right thing to say. Falkner hates like fuck that she's the one who always has to say it.

There's no good time, either. She waits, the sun hot on her shoulders through her dark suit jacket, until Tricia is relatively dry-eyed, until two friends have approached, condoled, moved on.

John Worth stands beside her. One shouldn't judge by appearances, but Falkner doubts he's a comfort, beyond the comfort of acknowledgment. Don't discount the comfort of that, here and now.

People pair up in such unlikely ways. Worth was slim but sturdy, meticulous, careful of people's reactions, cautious in speaking up. Tricia Andreoli is deep-bosomed and big-hipped, with a soft stomach the released pleats of her skirt can't hide. Impulsive, outspoken, a little combative, as an academic ought to be. And good for Daphne. They'd all been able to see it. Tricia made Daphne like herself.

Tricia smiles when Falkner walks up. It makes her feel guilty. She opens her mouth to say the inadequate things.

But Tricia beats her to it. "I'm glad you're all here. She loved you guys so much I would have been jealous if I didn't know how happy the job made her."

How dead the job made her. It's like a blow to the face. But Falkner swallows the bile back down and unclenches her teeth. "I'd tell you how wonderful she was, but you know that already."

Tricia's eyes swim; she squeezes them shut. A drop crawls down her cheek anyway. "As my freshmen insist on saying, 'True dat.' They learn it from television, you know."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"I think I'm taken care of. But thank you, Esther."

Taking care of things is about all Falkner has to offer anyone. "Well, remember, you're family. If you need a parking ticket fixed, we're pretty well-connected."

Tricia's eyes widen, and she smiles. "I thought you were the one with no sense of humor."

"I am."

Tricia laughs aloud. It makes Falkner feel as if it had been-- a good thing, getting out of bed this morning.

She holds out a hand to John Worth, and he takes it. He lets her squeeze it. It drops to his side when she lets go. He's in his late sixties, but he looks older; the fit of his suit makes her think there used to be more of him, and the skin of his face sags as if it ought to have more flesh to cover. Under his jaw, the sun catches a patch of stubble he missed with the razor, and the white bristles sparkle.

"Your daughter was one of the best officers I've ever worked with," she says. There's no way she can explain to him how much that means. "And one of the best people."

His mouth squeezes tight; the skin rucks under his lower lip. "One says that to the parents." His voice is rough, but not loud. "To assure them they did a good job."

The suspect was hostile and uncooperative. It makes her feel better to have something she knows what to do with. "I wouldn't think you needed assurance, sir."

"I was proud of my daughter, Ms.-- Agent Falkner. I loved her."

She wants to say, "You loved your picture of her. We loved *her*." But of course, she doesn't. There's only one day of atonement a year, after all, and she doesn't want to end up with a list she can't get through in twenty-four hours.

Too late; the casket shining in the sun behind her is already a day's worth.

Oh, God damn that word. God keep the soul of the woman she'll think of whenever she hears it.

*

"Hey, Villette," Lau says, at Chaz's elbow. He's watching Brady pull a blossom from the coffin, and wondering; Brady doesn't strike him as the type for sentimentally pressing flowers.

At least they gave her lilies, and not roses. *Sex and death*. Chaz still stands well-upwind, wondering if the choice of flowers was influenced by Reyes.

"Hey," he says, and turns to look at Lau. Her face looks strange without makeup, naked and younger. She's not wearing sunglasses--the modern answer to the veil--and her lashes are spiked and dark, but otherwise he can't tell that she's been crying. He'd bet he doesn't look that together.

She touches his hand, and he reads that, and puts it on her shoulder, watching her straighten as if the weight of his touch were the opposite. "Drive me home?" she asks.

He nods. She came with Falkner, but Falkner is with The Family, which means with Tricia, and Chaz suspects that Lau would rather take the bus than intrude on anything that might bring Daphne's partner any fragment of relief.

They walk away in silence through the buzzing heat of the day, behind the screen of trees, to where the line of automobiles awaits them. As he prods the Blue Beetle through the District traffic, he steals glances at her, because he can't read her silence. She looks forward, at the scarred and dented dash, at the star crack in the windshield, at the skyline. If her eyes focus on any of those things, it doesn't happen when he's looking.

But in her driveway, as he's taking the key out of the ignition, she reaches across her body to put her hand in the crook of his elbow. And when he turns, surprised, she searches his face, searches so hard it almost scares him. Then that hand comes up and knots in his hair and pulls him down into a fevered, open-mouthed kiss, salty and slick, her eyes wide as she stares into his.

"Just so you know what you're getting into when I ask you if you want to come inside," she says, a little breathless. Her hand slides down to the nape of his neck, fingers flexing. Urging.

Oh, so many reasons not to do this. Friendship, professional relationship, hard-won respect. The inadvisability of haircuts and other major life decisions while in the throes of grieving.

She needs him, and she's asking. And she's whipcord and softness under her black tailored suit, smelling of clean sweat and talcum powder. And he knows if he goes with her, there will be whole minutes when he doesn't remember how badly he hurts.

His friend would have rolled her eyes, or laughed, or asked him if he'd lost his mind, or teased him, or said, "Dude, you so owe me."

Now his friend won't say any of those things, ever. He's left here alone, and this is not his fantasy. But then, he's pretty sure it isn't Lau's, either.

"You're sure?"

Bitten lip, flush across her cheeks and down to the collarbones--hard to spot, if you don't have the knack of it, but she's fair-skinned enough that he can see. "Do you want to come inside?"

"Yes," he says, and opens the door.

Lock, door, door again, security system. He's just following her lead. She backs him into the corner by the coat closet, light coming through the columns of narrow windows on either side of the door, and kisses him again. And he kisses her back, while her fingers slip inside the knot of his tie and he intervenes long enough to get the tie tack out.

"Funeral sex," he says, just to get things clear, clear as that sunlight drenching the air around them, and she nods *uh huh* and catches his lip between her teeth and it's all over but the screaming. They're both half-naked by the time they make it to the top of the stairs, his suitcoat discarded on the landing, her white blouse draped like a ghost over the banister, her small breasts shy behind lace. He knows where the bedroom is; this is Lau's house, he's been here a thousand times. Familiar and yet unfamiliar, because when he's been here before his arms have never been full of warm urgent girl before.

There's more sunlight on her bed. It's not made--the linens a jumble of mismatched stripes and polka dots in brilliant colors, scattered with throw pillows in the shape of the sun, moon, and stars. He flips the comforter flat before she pulls him down across it. There's central air, but the sunlight is warm.

"Let me get my wallet." Hey, a guy can learn.

"Nightstand," she says, and what with one thing and another that's the last thing that gets put into words for a while, other than "Here, like this," and "Oh, Jesus," and "Wait, wait, I need a minute--"

When they're naked (she's more perfect than he imagined, her flanks all curves and golden shadows, the long muscles of her thighs smoothed under healthy girl softness so she feels like resilient satin he never wants to take his hands off) he rolls onto his back and draws her over him, both because he wants to see her and because there are things about his body he doesn't want her to notice right now. The scars are reminders of too much hurt, and neither one of them needs any more pain today.

He's about to kiss her again when she stops him, one hand on either shoulder, and sets herself back a little, frowning in preparation to whatever she's going to say.

He almost calls her *Lau* before he remembers why that would be stupid right this second. "Nikki?"

"I probably shouldn't tell you," she says. "But I've only done this with one guy since my divorce. So if I suck, I apologize."

He supposes if he were a normal guy, if this were a normal assignation, he'd have to ask. But he knows her, and he's got the job he does because he's pretty good at figuring stuff out from context, and anyway at this point--skin to skin, her warm, soft belly molding to his groin--he can't honestly stop himself from reflecting little splinters of the emotions shivering through her: affection, grief, pleasure, chagrin, embarrassment, fear, and the craving so hot and empty it makes *him* gasp in need.

He's a little shocked to realize that right this second, Nikki Lau is the loneliest person he has ever met. *Bulletproof*, he thinks, and wonders if he's the only feral critter in the B.A.U. who knows better than to cry out loud. Whatever she gave to her ex, whatever it cost her to offer it, Chaz knows now that he snapped it off and took it with him when he left, and all these years later it's only just starting to grow back.

He pushes the blunt-cut hair off her cheek, and it swings right back against the elegant bone. "One," he says, "you have never turned in less than a 4.0 effort in your life, lady. And two, as a member of the male sex, I feel the need to respectfully mention that that's the *wrong* word for failure to perform under these circumstances."

Her frown turns into something else, screws up into a complicated grimace. For a moment he thinks she's about to cry. Lines draw themselves around her eyes, down to the corners of her mouth.

He cups the nape of her neck in his hand and--cursing himself a little--says, "They'll take my union card for saying so, Nik, but if you want somebody to hold you, you don't have to fuck me to get it."

If she was about to cry she's laughing now. "I think I do," she says. "Because you're not going to get close enough for me to let you, otherwise. Crap. I'm such a *guy* sometimes." She shakes her head. "Besides, I *want* to. Do you know when the last time I *wanted to* was?"

He knows a rhetorical question when he hears one. "If you're a guy, I'm very confused." He touches her breast, nipple in the soft center of his palm, and watches her face change, feels her lean into it. "All right," he says. "Shutting up now."

That's how he winds up more or less in charge of the operation. There's a moment when she's lying across him, her back nestled to his chest, his mouth full of her hair and the taste of the skin of her neck, his fingers wet and sticky while she clenches in long, rowing strokes around him, and the sun's too bright across his face, so he closes his eyes and misses seeing her come. He

feels it, though, the rippling cascade so strong it's just this side of painful, thump of her skull against his collarbone, lancing sharpness of her nails in the back of his hand, and has no idea how he keeps her from pulling him after.

He does, though, and then she's languid and purring, relaxed bonelessly against him, warmer than the sunlight, giving him all the time he feels like taking to get there for himself. Whole long minutes when he can breathe, when his heart isn't breaking, until he loses all his breath in a rush and can't get it back, can't want it back, can't care if he ever breathes again.

#

Her head on his shoulder is dead weight, comfortable, heavy. "Well," she says, without lifting it to look at him. "It could have been Brady who made the pass."

"Are you kidding? Danny Brady makes a pass at me, I'm walking on air for a month. Only the best for him." He pauses, attempt to muster a suitably foreboding expression belied by the fact that he can't quite iron out the quirk at the corner of his mouth. "It could have been Sol. At which point I would know that my weirdness quotient had officially jumped the shark."

He feels her laugh start deep in her belly, and that it takes a while to bubble out of her. But then it stops, unfinished, as if she just thought of something. She sits up, straddling his hips, one hand still on his chest, the other crossed over her breasts, so all he can see is the sunlight on her flanks and shoulders. "Sol's still waiting for his princess."

Which makes him sad, because he knows that it is true.

"So," he says, words heavy on the humid air, blurred by the sunlight falling between them, "was that something you foresee needing to do again?" He winces as soon as it's out. Thank you, Captain Bad Segue.

She thinks about it. "No," she says, and does him the honor of not apologizing.

He puts his hand over hers. "Just don't expect me to say I'm sorry it happened." But then he lets his fingers slide across her hips and stroke the unbelievable softness of her thighs. He pulls gently, guiding. "Hey, you ready for a rematch? Come on up here."

She blinks over her shoulder. "Seriously?"

"If I only get one crack at this," he says, trying to feel the warmth of her honesty and trust--her *friendship*--instead of the sting of rejection, "I'm going to leave you with something to remember me by."

*

Several days later, a greeting card shows up interlaced with his usual afternoon pile of interdepartmental mail. It's not signed, and there's no writing in it. But it has a picture of a sorrowful beagle puppy on the front, and inside, the two words "I'm sorry" crossed out twice in thick black Sharpie.

*

Brady doesn't come into the burrow.

Brady brings you the flowers. They're inspected by the guard, who carries them around the barrier. Two lilies, white daisies, white iris: heady and half-sick in their sweetness, already browning at the edge.

By this, you know that outside your air-conditioned cairn, it's June.

"Where's Chaz?" you ask, and Brady shrugs through the Plexiglas and says, "He took Lau home."

"But you came."

He nods.

He doesn't visit often, but this is special.

"I'm sorry," you say, and the horrible thing is, you aren't. Or, you are, but beside the sorrow, dwarfing it, is a horrible quivering jellyfish delight, so much soaking pleasure in his pain. The it loves watching Brady suffer. And it loves watching you suffer as well. That pain is all its food, its only joy.

You bury your face in the flowers, though your hands want to twist on the stems. You could lean them in the corner of the sink and keep the stems in water, keep them alive and bright a little while.

But you won't.

You already know that you'll sit helplessly on the bunk and watch your hands pull them apart, bruise the petals, crush them into browning twists, until your fingers are rank with the juices.

And you'll enjoy it, too.

*

Reyes leans against the edge of the counter in the kitchenette, both hands on the lip, his back to the coffeemaker. He only picks up his head as Sol walks in. "Sol," he says, because it's after hours and he thought everybody else had gone home after the funeral.

"Steve," Sol says. He pours a cup of thick, cold coffee and takes it over to the microwave. There's a pause, while it whirrs and the table turns. "You all right?"

"No," Reyes says, then thinks about it, and snorts, and shakes his head. "No," he confirms. "How about you?"

Sol's coffee beeps. "I keep thinking," Sol says, as he slides it out of the microwave and sets it on the counter, "that the story doesn't go this way. That the author goofed something up."

"What do you mean?"

Sol crouches in front of the fridge, poking in the back until he finds the 2 percent milk with TODD written across the top. He keeps talking as he pours, stirs, returns the carton to the chill chest. "I mean I'm obviously in this story to be the guy who gets killed saving one of the beautiful young warriors. My mentoring is done. If they ever needed me before, they don't need me now. So why am I still here, and Daphne's gone? Something the editor needs to address, you know what I mean?"

He shuts the fridge, picks up his coffee, and walks out. After he's safely out of hearing, Reyes, who has been staring after him, says, "Yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

*

There's a funeral, and a wake, and friends, and relatives, and what Daphne would have called "All the Andreolis! So many Andreolis!" None of it means anything. It's a ritual, Tricia thinks. Something to tell you that it's time to fold up the worst of the grief and start pulling yourself together.

She tells herself she'll do that. Maybe. Tomorrow.

Daphne's team mostly doesn't come to the wake, and Tricia is glad. They have a secret, her and Daphne's work family and Daphne's father. They are inside a circle that no one else can breach.

They were there.

What happens now is for everyone else.

There's cake and coffee and tuna noodle casserole. Two kinds of fruit salad. More coffee. Some booze. Reyes does make an appearance, with his current flame, an archaeologist from Tennessee somewhere. Gray drops by: he says Brady went to see Hafidha. There's Pete Pauley and some of the other BAU types. Arthur Tan and his wife Padma Pavithra and their baby--who is hardly a baby now. Victor Celentano, brief and professional and repeating Falkner's offer that anything the Bureau can do, will be done.

Two or three of Daphne's distant relatives make appearances--a cousin, an aunt. Tricia's never met them before. The Worths aren't a close family.

The Director of the FBI was at the funeral. He doesn't come to the wake. Which is good: the house is too small for a security detail. Some of the Idlewood staff come, though, and some of Daphne's old EMT coworkers and college friends. That ex-cop who writes the true-crime stuff. That guy she was engaged to, who seems very cowed by the evidence of Daphne's life-after-Peter.

Daphne Worth was loved, and the evidence is all around Tricia now. It helps. A little.

Then they go home. Back to the cars and the hotels and the world, leaving Tricia alone in a rowhouse with a beautifully remodeled kitchen full of casseroles in tupperware and baskets of horrible apples. They save the worst fruit for the fruit baskets, she thinks. It looks so pretty, and tastes like Styrofoam.

Don't leave me alone. But they do--they leave you, and that's the way the world works.

She's sprung Tiger from his carrier--where he gladly spent the rush of the wake--and is scraping ambrosia fruit salad--*seriously, who eats this stuff?*--into the trash when the doorbell rings one final time. She glances at the clock. It's 11:30 p.m.

The peephole shows her Danny Brady, bulking to fill the stoop, hunched down a little so she can see his face. He grimaces apologetically. He must have seen her shadow.

Six more weeks of winter, she thinks, and opens the door.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," she says, and stands aside so he can come in. "You okay?"

"That's my line." He holds up a shopping bag. "I just got back from Virginia. I brought some stuff--"

"I'm throwing out food," she says, locking the door behind him. She wasn't going to throw out the cake Chaz made--but she doesn't think she can bear to eat it either.

"It's Gruyére and crackers," he says. "Some grapes. It'll keep. Or, if you want me to stick around, we can eat it right now. I also have two bottles of Chardonnay."

She blinks. She wouldn't have taken him for a gruyére kind of guy. And really not a Chardonnay one. And then it sinks in, what he's offering.

She laughs. It still feels like theft. "I appreciate your attempt to comfort the

widow," she says. "But I don't do boys."

And he grins at her--a little boy grin that makes his face look like it might crack--and answers, "That's cool. I don't do girls. But I do know what it's like to lie awake all night wondering what you could have done better, and what you should have done better, and frankly, I think it's better to get drunk."

Tricia knows he lost somebody. Daphne was never very clear about the details--she kept the confidences of friends--but Tricia can infer enough from silences to know that the big man her wife called the Cowboy had lost someone to the monsters. And that when it happened, he hadn't had anyone he could turn to--or even tell.

This is for him as much as you. She wonders what he'll tell her before morning. She wonders if it will help.

She takes the shopping bag from his hand. "Admit it. Gray picked the cheese."

"He wouldn't let me out of the house with a brick of Velveeta," Brady says easily. "Got a corkscrew?"

"Sure," she says. "And when the wine runs out, there's a bottle of vodka in the freezer."

*

"After a fashion, this is my fault." Hafidha swallows, her face ashy under the brown tone, faded now by too many sunless days. "If I had been there, I could have saved her."

Chaz looks down at his hands, rather than up at the Plexiglas and wire that separates them. He doesn't trust his face not to show his pain, and he doesn't want to give the Bug that much more reason to drive its talons into Hafidha. "Nobody could have saved her, Hafs. He ran a semi over her. And him. He killed the driver to make it happen."

Hafidha shakes her head, fingers tightening on the arms of her plastic chair. "Silly Platypus. Don't you know? Those things have computers in them."

Beta

Old Rag Mountain, VA, June 2011

If he had the wise old head the noobs thought he did, Stu would have turned back at Sperryville, when rain pebbled the windshield. But no, there was wise, and there was been-stuck-indoors-all-week-and-fuck-I'm-gonna-go-send-something. Somebody had to be as crazy-stupid and rock-deprived as he was. Stu hoped for a fellow boulderer, but he wouldn't bitch about top-roping, not today.

And there was always someone sending one of Old Rag's routes. Stu scowled past the slow wipers at the unvaried gray sky and made that, "almost always."

If it was still raining when he got to the mountain, he'd turn around and go home. Except it wasn't raining *much*... Nope, if he chucked it and went home, there'd be another day. If he slipped off slick rock or washed-down sand or wet moss and broke his neck? Not so much.

This close to D.C. they had climbers from everywhere. The Norwegians would boulder on ice, because they were crazy muthafuckas. French climbers from the embassy could be a pain in the ass, talking about Fontainebleau, and how Old Rag was gumby chow. Yeah, well, take a week off and go to Yosemite, man. Some people have *big* damn countries. No, that wasn't fair; the French guys were all right. And they could send a problem like fuck, you had to give them that. But he'd never seen any of them climb in the rain.

Stu nudged the truck up the paved road toward the Berry Hollow parking area. Through a break in the trees he caught a glimpse of a car's roof, light blue and bulbous. Could be hikers. But he had a feeling...

He made the corner into the parking area, and yeah, it was a manky VW that dated from back in the day before that Golf/Jetta/Rabbit noise, fenders pitted with rust, back lid held down with a twist of wire.

The Gecko and Doc Worthie, by the Goddess of Granite. And damned if the rain hadn't stopped. Suddenly the day promised not to suck.

Stu parked, hopped out of the cab, and dragged his crashpad and the nylon duffel with his chalk and shoes out of the bed of the pickup. Then he shouldered everything and headed up Saddle Trail.

Trailside Boulders was Stu's favorite bouldering anywhere on Old Rag. *Big* rocks, with everything from a nice warmup V2 to the burly V8 around Golden Crisp. Cracks, crimpers, traverses--and your reward for topping out was that sweet vista across the treetops, that made you feel as if you'd sprouted up out of the stone and could fly away if you wanted to.

Maybe the French climbers were right, and Fontainebleau was paradise. But Stu was pretty sure he'd never be happier in this incarnation than when he dragged himself up off that last hold and sat, sweaty and panting, on top of any problem in Trailside.

He picked his way through sticky mud in a low spot on the trail, and a cloud of midges went for his nose and mouth and eyes. Up higher, the breeze would blow them off.

The Gecko liked to boulder. Doc Worthie was more of a top-roper, but Stu thought she could be a damned good boulderer if she got over that unreasonable attachment to order. That pretty much summed them up: the Gecko was chaos, Worthie was order, and the two of them balanced out just right. The climbing version of *Lethal Weapon*.

The Gecko could have come from anywhere. He sounded American, but he looked like he was from space. Like David Bowie, in that movie where he played an alien. Over beers, Stu had heard other climbers speculate: the Gecko was some kind of spook, some Langley black ops mothafucka. Stu had made an obnoxious noise into his beer about that, but hadn't actually said anything. The Gecko might be an alien, but Stu was pretty sure he hadn't hit thirty yet, even on his home planet. Tough as new rope, yeah, and never gave anything up that he didn't have to, but a spook? Huh-uh.

Doc Worthie was a whole 'nother thing. When you met her, you met all of her; whatever she was like in the rest of the world, out on the rock she was wide open and straight up. Whether she was whooping and grinning because she'd nailed her first 5.9, or calling you a moron while she taped the stress fracture in your foot that you shouldn't have been climbing with, she was, well, one hundred percent her. Not to mention that she traveled with her own first aid kit and knew how to use it.

He'd passed Old Rag Shelter almost without noticing; the first honkin' big block of granite rose up and said hello. Nobody there. Stu listened for voices and heard nothing. But there were more problems further off the trail, and it wouldn't hurt to check 'em out.

He found the Gecko standing spraddle-legged at the foot of a slipped granite face, chunky for the first six feet, with so many bucket holds it was maybe a V2 max, and not even that for someone with the Gecko's reach.

But the Gecko wasn't looking at the first six feet. He was staring up at the smooth slab, like a baby headwall, that all that chunkiness had slipped away from.

Even for Trailside, it was tall. Strictly speaking, Stu wouldn't have called it a bouldering problem at all. Which meant they were top-roping, which meant

they were probably setting a new route, since Stu had never seen anyone sending that face, or seen or heard beta from climbers who'd sent it. Heinous bouldering, but a decent assisted climb, if shorter than most. Maybe Worthie was learning route-setting or lead climbing.

Except, where was she? And why was there no pile of rope and harness at the Gecko's long, skinny feet?

"Hey," Stu offered.

The Gecko turned and blinked, as if Stu had called him back from the asteroid belt. "Hey," he answered. A little hoarse, like he hadn't said anything for a while.

"Where's Worthie? Couldn't she come out and play today?"

The asteroid belt wasn't just a long way away. It was also fucking vacuum *cold*. Which was how Stu felt standing in the path of the Gecko's expression.

Stu hadn't ever read "couple" off the Gecko and Worthie. He didn't know why--maybe because every other couple he knew had little pissy fights with each other, and those two never did. But the absolute blank ice cube of the Gecko's face seemed to say, *Dumped.*

What the hell did she take with her that would make somebody like the Gecko look like that?

Stu re-read the clues. No rope--but no crashpad, either. No spotter. Was the Gecko waiting, hoping someone would show up and agree to spot him? Who would also bring a pad, because the Gecko had driven all the way out to Old Rag without his?

The Gecko wasn't always wise about this shit. Besides, when Stu had said "Hey," he was pretty sure the Gecko had been eyeing the problem with That Look.

He'd planned to free solo. Without so much as another human in yelling distance.

Stu wanted to tell him off, point out that if he got himself half- or whole-killed, he was crapping on the community, because the Park Service would likely freak and ban climbers in the park. It was fucking bad manners, like not cleaning your protection off a route. But there was that vacuum-cold. The memory of it made Stu say, perky as a damned cheerleader, "You figure to send that? I'll spot you." Holy crap, he sounded bogus.

But the Gecko just shrugged.

Maybe Stu had read it wrong. Maybe the Gecko hadn't been planning an act

of stupid. Or maybe he just didn't care if he had a witness.

Note to self: next time you think only crazy people would be out here, stay home. Stu unfolded the crashpad.

The Gecko started easy-peasy, as Stu had expected. That first six feet was practically a flight of stairs for him. He paused with his hands on that last gerry-rail ledge, tilting his head back to admire the wall. Then he hooked his toe over a little chickenhead of granite and started working up.

The holds got thin just over his head. Stu wanted to offer beta, but from where he was he had a crappy view of what was available for hands or feet, and no guidance to give. The Gecko was in a better position, right now, to find his route.

His knuckles disappeared into a jam crack, and Stu could see him cranking on that right arm, the muscles and tendons popping into relief as he dragged himself high enough to get a toe or an edge against a flake of rock. He caught one, then a solid little bracket for his other foot, and stood up, belly to the rock face, arms at full stretch. He scrabbled with the fingers of his left hand for a hold Stu couldn't see. Before Stu could squint out an alternate hold and yell it up to him, the Gecko squatted slightly over his toes, and sprang for it.

It was a beautiful thing, Stu admitted, while trying not to pee in his shoes. The Gecko had figured the deadpoint of his jump, where his fingers would catch the hold straight on instead of coming down on it, and it was like watching a thrown magnet stick to a refrigerator door. He scootched the pad over. At this point, if he tried to guide the Gecko's fall like a good spotter, the Gecko would likely squash him into roadkill, but he was there to minimize the heinously stupid, and he would do his job.

The Gecko found another handhold and hung from it like an orangutan. He smeared his shoe soles against the granite, inching upward. When he dug his right toe into the rock, Stu wanted to yell, *No, it'll push you away from the wall, and you'll barndoor--* But the Gecko used the momentum to swing sideways and up to another pair of holds.

Stu wanted to cover his eyes. Too much dyno, even for the Gecko, who could be a goddamn flying squirrel when it came to getting from one hold to another. Stu moved the crashpad again.

Dude, don't bring shit with you to the problem. The problem is always more than enough to deal with. If it's not, you should be doing something else. That's what he should have told the Gecko, instead of offering to spot him while he tried to kill himself.

Of course, the Gecko would have had to want to listen. Stu didn't think that was likely.

The Gecko had hold of a decent little ledge, more than a crimper, and maybe could have stayed there. Except he'd cranked so hard, and Stu could see his legs shaking like a Chihuahua in a snowstorm, and his grip just...quit. There was an ugly noise when his flailing hand whacked into the granite, and the shriek that was a human nervous system overriding conscious control and objecting to the likelihood it was going to ohmigod fucking *die*. A long fall, longer than crashpads were designed for.

And the Gecko decked.

Stu really, really wanted Worthie there, even though, if she had been, the whole scenario would probably never have happened. But he knew a little about broken bones, and what kinds of injuries were serious enough that you didn't want to move a guy who had them. The Gecko was fighting to get air into his flattened lungs, and the panic of not-breathing made him struggle even as Stu warned, "Don't move, don't move!" and tried to hold him still.

The noise he made getting that first breath in sounded like gagging in reverse, and painful. Then he rolled onto his side and curled in on himself like a shrimp tail. Well, if he could do that, at least his spine was probably intact. The Gecko shivered on the pad, little staccato jerks of the shoulders and knees that looked involuntary, but he didn't moan or yell or make any sound after that breath.

"Where's it hurt?" Stu asked. The Gecko's left hand, for starts, which had hit the granite pretty hard and scraped as he flung it out to try for a save. The palm was oozing blood from a half-dozen gouges, and another track down his forearm looked like he had left some skin up there on the ledge.

But the Gecko shook his head. He was still curled up, and Stu couldn't see his face, but the jerking had stopped. After a moment, he unfolded enough to sit, his knees drawn up and his head tucked between them.

"Fuck," said the Gecko, after a minute. His voice shook.

Stu considered leaving it at that. But he did have a sort of duty that went with that image of the wise old guy. So he swallowed the lump in his throat and said, "The rock is what it is. You can top out or not, it won't change the rock. Just you."

The Gecko didn't move, didn't say anything right away. Maybe he was thinking about it. Maybe he was trying to decide if he felt okay enough to punch Stu in the teeth for sounding like a fucking fortune cookie.

At last he sighed. "Good beta, man."

Stu suddenly felt the adrenaline he was full of and didn't need. His teeth really wanted to chatter. "You know the procedure," he said. "Pass it on." And he sat

beside the pad listening to the Gecko breathe, to his own breath in his nose, to the breeze, to whatever humidity and sunlight and stone sounded like, for as long as it took the pieces to slide back together.

*

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., June 2011

Daniel Brady spotted motion in his peripheral vision as a habit, as a survival strategy. Just because he was sitting at his desk in the middle of the entire Federal Bureau of Investigation first thing in the morning didn't mean he was going to turn it off.

So he noticed the movement at the desk cattycorner to his, and that it wasn't quite right. He looked up, but all he saw was Chaz Villette in his desk chair, hand on his mouse, waiting while his monitor woke up.

It was fifteen minutes before that visual alarm went off again. This time, he turned his head in time to see Chaz stand up.

Like an old, old man.

He also saw the slightly grubby gauze wrap on Chaz's left hand, starting at the knuckles and disappearing into his shirt sleeve.

"You okay?" Brady asked, just loud enough to carry across the aisle. The trapdoor in his stomach opened yet again, when he acknowledged the empty desk next to his own, the absence of anyone in overhearing range.

Chaz's face was about as expressive as a six-panel solid-core door. "I'm fine," he answered, and the precision with which he said it turned it into, *Get the hell out of my business.*

"What happened?"

Brady watched the complicated process in which Chaz started to shrug, remembered why he didn't want to do that, and did it anyway to prove he was *just fine*, thank you. "I fell."

"Off of what?"

Chaz tried to set him on fire with the power of his gaze, and when that didn't work, he turned on his heel and left the bullpen. Or rather, shifted his weight cautiously onto his back foot, turned, and limped toward the door to the hall.

Brady had no trouble getting to it first and holding it open for him. "You want to talk about it?" he asked.

"No."

"Sure you do. Briefing room all right with you?"

Chaz's jaw worked. That was probably him tying a nice bow around whatever savage and hurtful thing he was planning to say. So Brady headed him off. "I could knock you down with a fucking paper clip right now. Be a lot easier to just put up with me 'til I've had my say."

Chaz inhaled, exhaled, and march-limped to the briefing room.

Brady followed him in and shut the door. "We're a man down," he said, because tiptoeing up on it would just annoy them both.

Chaz's eyebrows climbed his forehead. "You were afraid I might forget?" His voice was hard and flat, and Brady thought he could hear it paving over a lot of soft ground underneath.

None of them ever forgot, not for more than a minute or two. When those minutes were over, memory came back like a knife fresh from the whetstone. "I thought you might have forgotten the context."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"What we're here for hasn't changed. If you can't stomach the work, that's all right. But if you can't, don't keep showing up and pretending we can still count on your ass."

"Fuck you."

Chaz said it calmly, as if it were an answer to Brady's little speech. It was, in a way.

"I'll take that as a reaffirmation of commitment."

One sharp exhale out Chaz's nose, which might have been exasperation or amusement.

Brady clenched his hands in his trouser pockets; the bite of his fingernails into his palms pushed him forward, made his voice as fierce as it needed to be. "In that case, you've got no goddamn business fucking yourself up just so you can suffer as much as you think you deserve. *Because whatever you do, you do it to the team, too.* You go into the field with anyone in the state you're in now? You might as well shoot 'em in the leg before either of you leaves the building."

Chaz looked anywhere but at him. Like an angry dog that couldn't fight back, like a trapped animal. *Danny Brady, you are the worst sonofabitch of your acquaintance.* Falkner might have been able to get at this another way. Hell, Reyes might have. But they hadn't, and it needed doing *now*, and when it came to Chaz Villette, Brady had a crowbar instead of a passkey.

Maybe he'd get a chance to apologize later. Someday. If they didn't die first.

"Are you done?" said Chaz.

"Yep." Brady crossed to the door and stopped with his hand on the knob. Natural dramatic pause. "I'm going back to work. Don't ever make me say all that shit again."

He went out, closing the door behind him. Because after you kicked a guy, you owed him a chance to nurse the bruise in private.

Funny how you could feel the ache in your own foot for days afterward.

Clash

Ashton, VA, July 2011

Chaz walks to Kay's office. He leans against the door frame, holding the door itself open, aware that he's living a lyric. Should I stay or should I go?

He asks, "Got a minute?"

She looks up, her eternal #2 pencil between her fingers, a strand of hair caught on the frame of her glasses. "Therapist, colleague, or friend?"

"Yes," he says, and steps inside. He shuts the door behind. He doesn't sit, but sways restlessly from one foot to the other.

"Special Agent Worth," she says.

He shrugs. Not exactly, but not exactly not either.

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

She sounds like she means it. Of course, she's paid to. But he's figured out by now that with Kay, it goes deeper than that.

"Me too," he says. "I mean, you knew her too."

Kay nods, accepting it because he needs her to. She does not swing out the platitudes that nearly everyone resorts to, and he's glad.

He says, "It's not... It's not that she's gone. I mean, it is, of course, but-- I just-- How did I wind up with the kind of life I can't walk away from, even when everything goes wrong?"

"Everything?"

"Hafidha," he says. "Daphne." The clutch of his throat catches him unaware halfway through her name. Angrily, he shakes his head, eyes stinging. "Everything that matters."

She doesn't argue. "And you want to walk away?"

He doesn't, though, and that's the scary part. Oh, yes, of course there's that bit that wants to bolt, that always wants to bolt. That thinks it would all hurt so much less if he just instituted the geographical cure. But he's needed here. Wanted. This is where he lives.

He shakes his head.

Kay asks, "How do you feel about that?"

Chaz laughs low and bitterly. "I think I hate it."

She stands up, lays her pencil down, comes around the desk. She leans against the front side and folds her arms. "Chaz?"

"Kay?"

That's a smile, near enough to pass for one. "Stepping out of my role as therapist for a moment here, this bears a remarkable resemblance to the state of affairs we refer to in our society as being an adult."

"Oh," he says.

"All things considered," she says, "I think you're doing okay."

Donation

Ashton, VA, and elsewhere

It was better to take donor organs from bodies that were still breathing, but Tricia Andreoli had the official power of attorney, and she said she could not bear it. She could not bear to let the doctors cut into the breathing, limp-armed body of her lover while that chest still rose and fell.

So they waited until the ventilator was disconnected; waited for the room to clear. And then came in, quick and quiet, with the equipment.

*

Daphne Worth's liver went to Iowa, to a fifty-five-year-old US Army colonel turned owner of a woodlot on a quiet country road. Blazing stars and Black-eyed Susans grew there in the spring. The colonel was once a drinker, but he had quit ten years back; poured every last little travel-sized bottle he'd hid in the cabinets and closets down the kitchen sink. He flung the last one so hard it smashed into bits in the drain, and then wrapped his arms 'round the knees of his sobbing wife and cried into them for forgiveness.

He was careful of his new liver. A month later, at his oldest son's wedding, he raised a glass to the boy and his brand-new bride, and toasted them with water.

*

This is all supposed to be confidential, of course. But Hafidha Gates is the woman who opened government databases like her mother could separate an egg, two perfect half-ovals resting in the palm of her hand and not a drop spilled out to the counter, and Charles Villette knows how to bargain.

"Official business?" she says, six a.m., pawing the sleep out of her eyes as he sets up the laptop.

"No," he says, and plugs in the USB mouse. "It's not."

This wakes her up. Her eyebrows rise in tandem; she takes in the set of his shoulders, the quick tight movements. "I should have known. Sunrise on a Sunday."

Chaz half-shrugs. "You know how much time off we get."

All of it, now, the beast in the back of her head snarls, and she puts a hand firmly over its muzzle. "So what're you sneaking behind Daddums's back?" she says; a reasonable compromise. A good balance in the neverending backdoor war that's care and spite, her words and the words that come out of

her mouth.

"Harpy was an organ donor," he says.

It shocks all the bad words silent.

"I--" she starts. Wipes sleep from her eyes, but no, she is awake. "You want me to sneak in."

"I just want to know," he says. Fists clenched, head slightly ducked; a little, not a lot ashamed. *The subject knows that what he is doing is wrong. But he doesn't care.*

And then the rage is building, and it's not just the bug, not just the mad dog that paces her thoughts night and sunless day. "You know what I could do with that thing?" she says, her voice pitched to cut. "You want to know what a city full of traffic lights stuck on green looks like? How about every dam in the country opening at once? How 'bout we find someone else's medical files and smear them all over Times Square? "

He doesn't flinch. He visibly refuses to flinch. "She was your friend too," is all he says, so low it barely reaches over the roaring in her ears.

"She left me here," slips out, and oh God, oh Lord, that is unworthy.

Chaz Villette's face tightens. *So, today's going to be a bad one*, that crease around the lips says, and Hafidha cannot find it in her to disagree. "There's something in it for you," he says.

He pulls it out of his messenger bag, and she recognizes it. She recognizes it with the kind of start that silences the thing in her head even further, because there are some things, some precious things she refuses to let it touch. She reaches out, but his reflexes are just as fast as her own; he pulls it back an inch, away.

"If you don't cheat," he says, and presses the power button on the laptop with one long, brown finger.

She pulls her chair up to the keyboard.

She doesn't cheat.

*

Daphne Worth's heart went to a twenty-five-year-old woman, born with a hole in her own heart and one arm foreshortened, allergic to just about everything. Her mother was an engineer and her father an importer, so they could between them afford the quick and precise and sybaritically expensive surgery that gave their middle daughter a new one.

The woman makes clothes: a small, quirky line of recycled fabric and patchworks, sewn on a home machine, her prosthetic holding the rucks of cotton steady. Her parents do not approve: *Your great-grandparents ruined their hands doing white people's laundry so you wouldn't have to.* This is true. But she says, *Ba ba, I love it, and life's too short*, and her father turns his face away and cannot bring himself to argue.

Her grandmother still sews, sometimes. When the woman was little, her grandmother made her a stuffed bear from scrap fabric, misshapen and irregular and entirely abnormal. Her parents bring it to her in the hospital bed, wrapped in a plastic bag to keep safe the sterile recovery room where they will know, in a few days or weeks, whether she will pull through or die. She wraps her arms around it in her sleep those next nights, and the plastic crinkles like a lullaby.

*

Her kidneys went two different directions: one south into the Carolinas, one west to Oregon. They were sutured on the same afternoon into the body of a forty-five-year-old woman with lupus and a thirty-two-year-old man who had suffered from diabetes since he was a child in Brasilia. Her sons held her hands and cried openly; one had begged to donate his, but the hospital had called him too young. His husband held his hands carefully, tracing the half-moons of his nails until he slept.

Her pancreas traveled not far at all: just down the hall, where the doctors slid it into place instead of a New Jersey minister's cancerous one, and a delegation from his church hugged each other and thanked God for the kindness of donors three floors away from where Charles Villette and Tricia Andreoli wept.

*

"That's all," Hafidha says, and pulls her hands away from the keyboard like it's electric. "That's it. Take it away."

Chaz reaches in, deft as a mongoose, and pulls the plug.

The colour, the light on the laptop screen dies. Hafidha watches it hollow-eyed, hands literally held down between her bottom and the seat. They tremble: little fishes gasping for water, gasping in the plain good air.

"Make you feel better?" he asks after a moment.

"No," she snaps.

"Me neither," he says softly, and tugs the power cable from its jack. It dangles a moment in his hand, and then he wraps it, long-fingered, round and around its own bending black throat.

She waits until he puts the laptop in its padded bag, the cords and components and utterly unnecessary mousepad in the zippered pockets. Her hands are trembling. She will not say *Give it.*

He doesn't make her wait too long. He hands it over: a black Objekt 775 tee-shirt, rumpled; just another artifact of someone's abandoned laundry hamper. She squeezes it in her hand; holds it to her chest.

"It smells like him," she says.

She knows this can't be true. It's been over two years since Erik died; over a year since the smell of his body faded out of every tuft and molecule and cranny of the world. There is nothing left in the world that smells of him, not even in dreams, and she's tried. But for now she buries her face in the shirt and pretends, breathes in, breathes out, fixes it in her memory as something special and true.

"I'll see you next week," Chaz says, and lets himself through the anteroom door.

She stays there: not balancing, not trading off, not paralyzed with indecision but just present. She stays there in the dark created by worn cotton on closed eyes until the door buzzer rings, and "Ms. Gates?" floats to her ears.

She looks up: a guard and an orderly, the usual breakfast arrangement. Breakfast on an unbreakable plate, with utensils too dull to slice skin, or veins, or pancreas heart and liver. Suicides have a higher rate of organ donation than accidental deaths. Nobody knows why, but Hafidha doesn't have far to go to guess: after enough time in the hole you will do anything, everything to be useful; to make good; to be loved.

She balls up the shirt in her hand; tucks it under the chair. *You're safe enough there, love,* she tells it, and stands.

"Another day in Paradise, then?" she says, sharply, and picks up the tray.

4.00 "Walking Back To Houston" - by Chelsea Polk

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

Washington, D.C., March 2009

Hafidha Gates comes into work 45 minutes early, every day. She never stops at the coffee station until Chaz gets there, since she buys coffee on the way (Wednesday: free trade, bird friendly, shade grown dark roast from Peru) safely contained in her spill-proof Thermos of the day (Wednesday: a vacuum-insulated quart's worth, lime green, white hibiscus print) and pours precisely doctored and piping hot into her mug of the day (also Wednesday: a plain white mug that simply says *I'm blogging this* with the handle glued on so well you can't nearly tell) and starts the bureau's computers the mundane way.

This is Hafidha Gates's routine:

She collects email that funnels into sorted and tagged folders from her public emails, covert addresses, and outright sockpuppets trawling web forums, usenet lists, Livejournal, and web data crawlers. While she pulls nice tufts of a handpainted alpaca top to continue from yesterday, her instant messaging service pops up on monitor three, logging into various chatrooms that support some of her sock puppets and anonymous accounts. Firefox asks her which identity to use--she nods for "newshound" and a half dozen windows all preset to various keywords tab in and populate.

But this morning, Hafidha pauses her spinning prep in favor of one email folder, flagged with one message.

Her favorite eBay seller has listed again.

Hafidha refers to that seller as objectsofdesire2112, even though Hafs knows that she is really Helen Danforth, 38, of Brooklyn, New York--a powerseller who gets unbelievable bargains in the garment district. Helen has exuberant taste, an eye for fabrics, and a tendency to write item descriptions with the

passion of a true clotheshorse and the painful honesty of a young adult novel protagonist. Hafs has never purchased anything from her that was not exactly as described, down to the minutest flaw in construction.

Today, she's selling designer eyeglass frames, and Hafidha drums her feet in delight. Optometrists sell frames at a 300% markup when they're being modest. Objectsofdesire2112 starts the bidding on her frames at 5.99 each. Hafs is a kid in a candy store, but she especially likes the anodized titanium frames in swirling peacock colours--the blue and green, but also chips of golden bronze.

Hafs sets a modest opening bid on those, so she'll remember to set her automatic bidder when it closes in three days, and then practices wiggling her nose to make the computers dance through windows for her while she drafts alpaca into spiderweb.

*

The team is out today (Friday: 100% Kona, market price, a 20 ounce travel carafe with a clear lucite shell displaying carefully wound yarn of varying colours and textures, spooled around in an ombré gradation, from undyed ivory to oatmeal to burlap to sable brown.) Hafidha sets some searchbots to trawl for businesses in the area that sell a particular brand of barber scissors while she references records from seven different school boards, looking for disciplinary records involving forced hair cutting in 1991. She's reading about a gang of football players who overpowered a punk and hacked off his acid green liberty spikes. It's not a match for the profile, which indicates that the victim would have been female. But the mohawk story distracts her, because it's probably confirmation of a legend she knows from back in the FIDOnet days.

And that's how her beautiful eyeglass frames get sniped, right from under her nose. She doesn't even remember until the email flag pops up, displaying the first few words from the message.

"Robbed!" she swears under her breath, and clicks the link. She's one minute and three seconds too late to snatch victory from the blackguard's claws; her eyeglass frames sold to divinityjones92 for...

Hafidha whistles at the sum. Not bad from a $5.99 start. She twirls her spindle again and looks up the info on divinityjones92, interested in getting to know a possible nemesis in the acquisition of the cool. She doesn't bother with the feedback, preferring to see what divinityjones is currently buying or bidding. The price column on divinityjones92's bid list confirms that Hafs is dealing with an unrepentant sniper, with a penchant for accessories and an unusual fetish for silk neckties.

"Let's see who else's heart you're breaking today, highwayman Jones,"

Hafidha murmurs, going after the list of her current bids:

BLUE & SILVER CHOKER UNUSUAL LINKS **UNIQUE**

[editor's note: in the original this text was animated to cycle through colors]

And she sits straight up, spindle parked by reflex. "The Hell."

The listing is by fishfood993, with under five minutes left. Hafs mouses down to the large photo automatically,

The choker has a pendant of oval lapis cabochons bracketed by silver motifs, fluted like the vanes of a feather split down the middle, or perhaps the nodding heads of swans. The chain links echo that same motif of feathers/ swans, interlaced by their curving necks. It's a flapper collar, Hafidha knows. But more than that, she knows this necklace.

She's seen a picture of it in a case file.

Hafidha doesn't remember which case file, though, and it might not be the same piece. Crazy to think that it is the same.

There are four minutes and nine seconds left on the auction, and therefore, not enough time to doubt. She genies the cursor up and left on the screen, clicking into the sniper program she wrote. It's the big machine, and she doesn't use it unless she really covets something. She uses it to log into eBay as Virginiaboheme--a good identity, fairly generic, and unused for 94 days. She sets her top bid in a way that will guarantee acquisition.

Hafs doesn't have to put her spinning down but she parks the spindle as she starts a text to Chaz: *what file is this?* and wheels back to attach the photo before sending the message.

She can leave the sniper. The piece is hers. She's already running the seller ID and recording every piece of feedback given or received since the account opened--

Her phone vibrates and chirps. *Belinda Green. Miss. person rep 2004 Madison WI. Remains found 2006, Wyo. fractures MTRSL and MTCL. Sol desk. L. 3 from bott. Y?*

The bidding is at $278.91. Hafidha wiggles her nose. *NVM*

The response doesn't even take ten seconds. *SRSLY*

"Chaz, you're busy," Hafs says out loud. but sends: *On ebay. Sniping now.*

WTF?

"That's my line, Platypus." *SRSLY*

A short pause, then: *Call Later? When Alone?*

The auction ends at $308.44. Hafidha moves to pay automatically, but flicks the spindle again. Wait for the invoice. She wants an email contact from this person. She wants time to think.

She wants time to discuss it with her baby bruddah.

Later, she texts to him. *Yes, alone.*

*

Chaz cams her 30 minutes later. He's arranged comfortably at the table in his hotel room, and it's apparently pink shirt day.

"You found yourself a girl genius," Hafs says, already feeling the tension melt off her forehead.

"Hey, Hafidha. I'm supposedly analyzing the history of forced haircutting and ordering room service. Well, I really did order room service. It should be here, ah, soon."

Hafidha waves her plastic container of tom kha gai. "Oh good, we'll make it a dinner meeting. So I found Belinda Green's file, precisely where you said it was--"

"There were two files on his desk when I gave it back to him."

"I'm trying not to think about that. Well, between reading about how Belinda Green had her hands and insteps crushed before she died, I have been spending time examining our seller, fishfood993. There are 72 items of feedback, and I have managed to capture archived listings of the last...seven months."

Chaz's mouth curls up. "I thought the listings disappeared off the website after three?"

"Oh, they do. But the server just drops the links." Hafs sips a little coconut milk soup off her plastic spoon. "I've got it waiting to sneak into server maintenance for the rest. Anyway, fishfood993 tends to sell antique 20th century jewelery, of which I have a passing acquaintance," she says, tapping the Bakelite necklace at her throat.

"All right. So what do you notice about the listings?"

"Well, the reason why I've never bought anything from fishfood is because he doesn't tag his auctions to be of interest to collectors, which on the surface does not make any sense. We've all heard the story of the collector's great bargain from somebody who doesn't know what he has, but fishfood almost appears willfully ignorant. He's selling things that collectors would pull hair

for, but he advertises it--look."

Hafidha sends him a file of a captured auction, depicting another necklace of hammered silver plates, hinged at cabochons of Baltic amber and pearl. "There's a level of jewelry collecting that isn't Harry Winston, but isn't pot metal and paste either. and a good piece will go for hundreds of dollars. Fishfood has a lot of that kind of stock--that necklace could fetch in the four hundreds if the right people knew about it, but it sold for--"

"Twenty five ninety nine," Chaz leans forward, peering. "You know, that's really pretty. Not in your colours, though."

"You know me that well, Chaz. And it's not like these pieces are one of a kind, so I could be grasping at nothing. But ORANGE & SILVER COLOR CHOKER/COLLAR **PRETTY**? That's no way to advertise a Trifari."

The knock sounds through the laptop's mic. "Hold on." Chaz gets up, disappears out of frame, comes back with a tray. "You know it is?"

"You can has cheeseburger? Outraged."

"We'll get two when I come back," Chaz promises. "Now, you know it's a Trifari?"

"I'm pretty sure. Costume would be shiny plated brass and plastic. The necklace I bought--if Belinda Green's insurance file is reliable--the blue and silver necklace I bought is Art Deco, from the Egyptian Revival style, with real lapis lazuli and solid sterling silver. Probably made in the 1920's. She had it valued at three hundred dollars. But fishfood acquires this stuff, probably from estate sales--he's not selling out of a single estate collection. The tastes don't match. So why not maximize on return by pointing it at the people who will pay the most?"

Chaz sits back with a home-cut french fry. "All right, so what's happened so far? You can see it's a gamma, but does it connect?"

Hafs takes a long, slow breath. "I got my invoice for the auction already. Came in less than a minute after the auction closed. The IP has been bounced to Russia and back. The paypal address I have leads to a mail drop in Cleveland, but fishfood993's location is given as Lexington, Kentucky, and the name on the PayPal address AND the mail drop doesn't pop up on my search to make a match to a real, moving around person. Fishfood's a fake. And..."

Hafs tries to swallow, can't, wets her mouth with iced green tea. "Belinda Green had an eBay account."

*

The last thing Hafidha Gates does before she leaves the office that evening is pay for her auction win, plus priority shipping, plus insurance.

The first thing that she reads when she returns to the office (Monday: free trade, organic Kenya coffee with proceeds going to orphaned girls, a stainless steel and black rubber thermos, and her caffeine molecule coffee mug) is an email to virginiaboheme's email address.

Subject: My Regrets

"Oh, really?" Hafidha murmurs to herself, and opens it.

Dear Virginia;

I am sorry to inform you that I cannot ship the auction you won on Friday. I had a most unfortunate accident here over the weekend and the necklace has been terribly damaged.

I have refunded your purchase, shipping, and insurance. My deepest regrets, and I hope that you will not think ill of my future listings.

John Victor

fishfood993

Hafs holds her coffee mug in one hand and twirls her pen with the other, glaring hard at the message header's automatic result--the IP resolves to a Russian remailer. He's covering his tracks like mad. And John Victor doesn't have an electric bill or a cell phone account or a parking ticket in Lexington, KY. Or Cleveland.

And now the necklace is broken.

Right.

Hafs clicks back to the listing, checks the bidding history, and cheers under her breath. The Big Machine did its job by out-sniping another sniper--but divinityjones92 wasn't the only highwayman with her crosshairs on that necklace. The Big Machine also beat Metalliclove1, who had set a maximum bid of $306.91, four seconds before the auction's closing.

Hafidha runs Metalliclove1's feedback and bidding history through her database crawler and finds that Metalliclove1 is a fan of fishfood993's listings. Which isn't suspicious. Hafs buys from many of the same sellers; that's just what people do.

But Metalliclove1 never won an auction from fishfood993 that doesn't have the odd dollar values of the last second auction. Most of the other purchases were low value items, with serious bidding wars on three items from another seller--classicallure25. Hafs sets to looking at that seller's store, sipping her

coffee.

The first listing reads:

LIME GREEN & GOLDTONE BROOCH PIN **STUNNING**

"Goldtone, my ass," Hafs snarls. "That's a Miriam Haskell."

She's on the phone to Chaz before the page finishes loading.

Act II

The team is back. Hafs greets Brady with a smile and outrageously flattering compliments, mutually exchanged, gets in line behind Sol and Daphne for some of Chaz's coffee, and hovers once those two leave.

Chaz leans against the counters. "Okay, so what do you have?"

"Suspicion and conjecture," Hafs replies, pouring too much milk into her mug. "But I can't leave it alone. I set the sniper on the Miriam Haskell brooch using virginiaboheme again, and guess what? the listing got cancelled."

"Cancelled."

"All of them from classicallure25 and fishfood993. They are all gone. The good stuff and the junk. Now why would he do that?" Hafs waits, staring up at Chaz.

Who looks back, a little frown knitting his brows. "Somebody might think that the presence of that necklace on eBay is simple coincidence--"

"Oh, that C word we don't believe in--"

"--and you would have ended up paying too much for a piece of costume jewelry-"

"*Antique* costume jewelry-"

Chaz's eyes flicker from her face to over her shoulder.

"What's the conference in here?" Brady moves over to the coffee machine, pouring himself a cup.

"We were just--"

"Hafidha may have discovered a gamma operating on eBay," Chaz says, sipping coffee. Perfectly bland. An everyday thing to say.

Well, around here...

"What?"

"I saw the fnords, Brady Beautiful, on this listing for this necklace. and then I clicked and saw the picture, and I knew that I'd seen it somewhere, and so I texted Chaz and he told me where, but there was only a few minutes left so I sniped it. Hard. You still with me?"

"Right." Brady leans back on the counter and drinks a quarter of his coffee at a go, raises it to signal 'go on.'

"I won, I paid, and then the seller sends me an e-mail, oh no, it's broken. So I go digging around and find links to other accounts--another selling account and another buying account that seem designed to snipe certain items out from under buyers, and that sniper was on the necklace too, so I see where *else* he's sniping and that leads me to a listing with a designer mid-century brooch, so I put up a bid on that--same eBay identity, but on a different seller and *poof*." Hafs stars her fingers apart, like a puff of smoke or a bloom of fireworks.

"Poof. The listing got cancelled?" Brady asks.

"They all got cancelled. Both the accounts, all the listings. There could have been more than that, but that's the two that I found. He pulled up the listing on Belinda Green's necklace--"

"You can't be sure it's the same necklace."

"It may not be the same necklace but there is something definitely up with this fishfood person. And I checked Belinda Green's probate--the credit card statements indicate activity on eBay. She had an account. She had a necklace listed on her insurance that matches the description of the necklace she was likely wearing when she disappeared--a necklace that was not recovered."

"It likely disappeared because her killer kept it as a trophy." It's the obvious objection, the simple solution. "And what kind of killer would let that trophy out of his hands?"

"Gary Ridgeway would take jewelry from his victims and leave them as anonymous gifts for his female co-workers," Chaz moves to the coffee machine, spoons two heaping sugars into his mug. "We can suppose that seeing the jewelry on his unsuspecting co-workers gave him a chance to re-live the experience of the victim as a secondary outlet."

"And just how would that work on the Internet?" Brady demands. "Put it up on eBay and it can go anywhere. How does he continue to maintain control?"

"Well that's just it," Chaz says. "Hafs used an incredibly powerful auction sniper to ensure acquisition of the piece. The seller fishfood then wrote to her over the weekend to give her a refund, claiming that it had been accidentally damaged."

Brady rinses his coffee cup, leaves it in the sink. "Because Hafidha--or

virginiaboheme, more properly-doesn't match what fishfood wants. Right? But--"

"Hafs. The second listing you found," Chaz says. "You never said. Did it have fnords?"

"No. No fnords. Wait. What does that mean?"

"At a guess?" Chaz asks. "That was more camouflage. Not like the necklace that did have significance."

Oh. "I know how he does it."

Chaz and Brady halt in mid-debate. "What?"

"Well, I know how he could do it." Hafidha shrugs.

Daniel Brady sticks his head in the fridge, comes out with a water. "Hafidha, I agree that something is going on but what if it's not what you believe it to be?"

"Then I'm wrong, and I'm out a few hours work."

"And if she's right, she will have exposed the murderer of Belinda Green and even more women."

Hafidha and Chaz turn to Esther Falkner's voice and the door.

"The person who murdered Belinda Green doesn't do that just once and then walk away. Hafidha, could you bring everything you have into the conference room," Esther nods to her. "About fifteen minutes?"

"Of course."

Esther gets a bottle of water for herself, and heads out of the kitchen.

"I have to get an email out," Brady says. "See you in fifteen."

Hafidha lets her shoulders fall, and rolls them. "I said I think I know how he does it, but I'm just guessing. What am I going to tell everyone?" She puts the first donut box in the trash, snags a custard-filled donut with chocolate icing.

"Hafs, it's okay. All you have to relate is what happened--what you did, and the whole chain. Point out where you're speculating, but play on the pattern."

"Pattern?"

"You have fifteen minutes to find other missing women or found bodies that were missing this specific type of jewelery, and evidence of an eBay account. And all you have to find is one, right now. In fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes." Hafidha says, already moving for the door. "Easy. Watch

this. Already doing it."

*

She watches Chaz the most. He follows with few fidgety gestures, even though he's heard most of it. Sol leans back in his seat, eyes narrow, but not in disbelief. More...considering. Daphne clasps her hands together, elbows on the table, sits forward in her chair. Brady tilts his chair back, but only a little. Falkner listens, jots occasional notes, looks back and makes tiny nods at all the right moments.

Stephen Reyes writes on his clipboard, glances at her over the edge of it by rote, doesn't actually look at her.

"And when yours truly managed to snipe the best price with only two seconds to spare, fishfood993--who likes to call himself John Victor, and can't decide if he lives in Ohio, where his PO box is, or Kentucky, as his eBay profile claims, sent an automated invoice with an anonymized email path--and then less than 48 hours later, another anonymized email with a refund and an apology, stating that the necklace had been damaged just that weekend."

"Do you have any information leading to the real identity of the UNSUB?"

Now Reyes looks at her, and Hafs almost wishes he wasn't. "No, my captain. What I have is a pattern. This is how it started, with this listing."

Hafs clicks the remote in her hand, and the slide shows a capture of the "BLUE & SILVER CHOKER UNUSUAL LINKS **UNIQUE**" auction results. "I can't show you what I saw here. On the slide, it's just black letters. When I saw the listing, it came up with the glorious Technicolor that I see as gamma activity on the Internet."

Hafs clicks the remote again, and the next slide shows the picture included with the eBay listing. She counts three and clicks to the photograph in Belinda Green's case file. "There's more than a wee bitty resemblance here. I have also discovered that Belinda Green had an eBay account, though I haven't found proof that she bought the necklace on eBay."

Hafs raises her hand and the screen now shows a woman's face. She's smiling, a pretty woman in her mid-30's, dressed in a pale green twinset with a pink enameled chrysanthemum pin on her left breast. "Jacqueline Kincaid, cellist, Seattle. Disappeared December 2005. Remains discovered in Hell's Canyon National Park, Oregon, February, 2006. The brooch she is wearing is a Trifari, probably designed by Alfred Phillipe, and apparently one of her favorite pieces. It was listed in her physical description on the original missing persons report. All of her clothing, purse, identification was found at the dump site. The brooch was not recovered."

Chaz shifts. His feet slide from atop the caster bars to the floor, one elbow landing smoothly on the table as he leans forward. Hafs clicks the remote again, silently counting to three before clicking the crime scene photo away. The scratches on Jaqueline Kincaid's face--her eyeless face--shutter and fade.

Blink, and now a woman with masses of dark curly hair, dressed severely in black, herself a backdrop for a collar encrusted with topaz, amber, and ruby colored cabochons. "Theresa Lee Strong, ethnic crafts importer. Disappeared from Mesa, Arizona December 2002. Identified through dental records when her remains were discovered in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument near Yuma in 2004. That necklace is art glass, meant to simulate fancy and semi-precious stones. She was often photographed with it, and her will specifically named it to go to a niece. The piece was never recovered."

Hafs clicks the remote again, and the next slide is a reconstruction of the small bones--or rather, an arrangement of the recoverable fragments of the bones of her left hand.

"This is a MasterCard statement from Jacqueline Kincaid," Hafs says, and magnifies the whole scan, and highlights purchases from eBay, Inc. "And here's a Visa statement from Theresa Lee Strong. The--relevant portions are highlighted."

Nobody speaks.

"I realize that the connections between these women are somewhat tenuous," Hafs says. "But with a little more time--"

"You'll find more," Reyes answers. "What have you noticed about the victims?"

"Well, they were all divorced women of reasonably comfortable means, working for themselves or in the arts. They come from different parts of the country, but all of them had eBay accounts and vintage jewelry that they were fond of that was not recovered when their bodies were discovered."

"You said in the kitchen that you know how he did it," Brady says.

"I know a way he could have done it," Hafs corrects.

"Well?"

"Hold on," Sol says. "We don't want that interfering with the victimology."

*

They use printouts from Hafs's findings on the board for everything but Belinda Green's necklace, to start. As they move on, facsimiles get replaced with file material.

They have Jacqueline Kincaid already. They have a photograph of her crushed hands, and an extensive report from the medical examiner who performed her autopsy, giving the opinion that her hands had been restrained with the fingers splayed out, and then smashed with a blunt object, like a sledgehammer.

Her feet, however, were probably crushed using a vise.

Hafs doesn't care that sitting cross-legged in her swivel chair is both unprofessional and unladylike. Daphne has to bring her hands out from the protective clasp at her breast, too.

Further physical examination indicated that Jacqueline had been raped, her eyes torn out, and she'd been manually strangled.

"The UNSUB is strong," Chaz notes. "Manual strangulation isn't as controllable as a ligature method."

"This UNSUB is angry, filled with rage," Brady says. "'I'll strangle you with my bare hands.'"

"But it's not a power and control urge from a sexual sadist. He doesn't manually strangle them to watch them die, because he puts their eyes out first," Daphne comments.

"His crimes are personal," Sol says. "What he does to these women is ritualistic and meaningful. And it stands to reason that he is doing to these women what he cannot do to the person he wishes."

"And that he can't, ever," Chaz says. "For some reason, the person who is the trigger for this rage is out of his reach, possibly already dead."

"Dead in a way that the UNSUB sees as unfair or inappropriate," Daphne agrees.

Hafs stops just to watch and wonder if they realize how they mesh when they do this. "So he's going around making sure that these women get what they deserve?"

Everyone turns to look at her.

"Exactly," Reyes says. "These women are like the woman who wronged him. What did you say that you found in common, again?"

Hafs answers. "These three women were all divorced. His mother? Abandoning him after the breakup of her marriage? His wife?"

Esther nods once, slowly. "Mothers tend to get custody of their children. The UNSUB's mother probably had him in her late twenties, and the divorce probably went through in her early to mid thirties—the approximate age of the victims."

"Because there were things she valued more. Her hands, her feet, her eyes," Daphne murmurs.

"Show business?" Chaz asks. "Dancing, singing, acting? Art? Music? It's hard to make a career in those. Harder for a woman with a child. Harder for that woman as she gets older. And the victims--a professional musician, a folk art importer, and Belinda Green taught dance. All aligned with the arts and creative industries."

"Victims from all over America. He travels. His work necessitates travel. He could be a salesman, or--"

"Computer programmer. IT specialist. A hired gun--takes on a contract in a certain place, works there for a few months, finds somewhere else to go. He's got a good resume, and he gets out and moves on before his co-workers drive him out with pitchforks," Hafidha says. "He probably says that he works contracts because it's a way for him to travel around the country, that he likes the variety."

All eyes on her, again. But Hafidha is on a roll, now. She knows this person. She knows the type.

"He's reasonably well off, takes pride in his appearance, and he is undeniably handsome. He probably has a very nice car, an impressive apartment, and displays culture and sophistication. He is well read, an interesting conversationalist, and probably touch types at upwards of 80 words per minute. Because I'm telling you, I know how he does it."

"How does he do it, Hafs?" Chaz asks.

"I think that he can do something like what I can do," Hafs says. "I think that he uses the Internet to find the women who represent what he wants in a victim because he can tell what they're like. But where I just see gamma activity, he can do what in-person abductors do--he can profile the right victim across the Internet."

Daphne looks up. "That's scary."

"Yeah," Hafs agrees. "He might research them, but I think he can discern faster than that. He can read a buying history like a child abductor can read the body language that tells him that this child will help him look for his lost dog, or that this child will run away and find an adult."

Everyone looking at her now. Sol nods very slowly at Hafs, but doesn't say anything.

"He's a Lothario and a cyber-stalker. Think the eBay identity, fishfood--somebody bids on his bait. He checks them out. If they come up aces, he sells them the necklace. If they don't, he uses another identity, snipes it, and re-lists

it later to try again. But if they do, then he stalks them, finds out where they hang out, and then gets to the real work. He seduces them online. They arrange a meet, and then he kills them."

"And once you buy one of the right pieces, you're marked for death. He's going to get that piece back," Chaz says. "He could take months to get to you, maybe even years. Many people contentedly carry on long distance relationships conducted almost entirely on the Internet, punctuated only by occasional meetings and nebulous plans for a future together."

Chaz shrugs, and examines his mechanical pencil, turning it in his fingers. *Oh, Chaz.* "And so he's probably got a collection of women on his line," Hafs says. "And none of these women have any idea that their Internet boyfriend is actually a killer.

"And if I'm right about what he can do...I need to back up a bit to explain. If my virginiaboheme identity had been the right type, he would have let the necklace go. But viginiaboheme has some trading rep on Make-Up Alley and is characterized as one of a legion of low-powered Washington office pool drones. Not an artist, dancer, craftsman. Just a regular person who shops too much. Also, if you look at Virginaboheme's OKCupid profile, she's listed as single-never married. Not the right type.

"But then I used that same identity to bid on a brooch that was under-listed that didn't sparkle and fnord, from an entirely different seller. Now we go into the land of If. If that brooch wasn't one of his key pieces, then why not sell it to virginiaboheme? And If the virginiaboheme identity wasn't suspect, why did classicallure and fishfood cancel every single listing on both accounts?"

"Because you think he made you," Sol says. "Cop or Jammer?"

"I don't know and I can't set up a test to find out," Hafs says. "But I'm not sure. I'm going to assume both. Which might make it hard for me to find his real identity."

"So if he is so good at hiding his real identity, how can we find him?"

"We don't find him--well, we find his personas. But we find his victims. They're not good at hiding, probably don't have the first clue how. People regularly post personal information about themselves, photographs of themselves, their full name, where they live, where they work. They socialize, they congregate, they make friends."

"We could develop a linguistic model of the UNSUB's language from these eBay profiles and search for distinctive markers, finding more auctions and their subsequent bidders," Chaz says.

"I'll keep looking for his victims. He could have more than one on the line,

there could be more women in national parks. I need to stay away from looking for the UNSUB directly until I figure out how to get him."

*

Tuesday. Bird-and-Butterfly friendly organic Sumatra, from a coffee plantation owned by a woman who refused to go industrial or sell out to Starbucks. Hafidha sips from a sprightly hand painted yellow mug, searching eBay listings.

She's got classicallure, Metalliclove, and fishfood so heavily watchdogged he can't even edit an auction without her knowing about it. Not a whisper; she's doing what he expects.

Hafidha is hunting down John Victor's buyers, cross-referencing eBay usernames with social networking sites and interest forums. She's looking into women's lives as she pores through their forum posts and their internet journals--so many of them, so open and unassuming. She's found real names, photographs, even flimsy attempts at alter identities.

She knows that most of these buyers are not possibles. Many of them bought the pot-metal and junk that Victor salts his listings with, cover for his true bait. But she checks them anyway, searching out their lives, finding them so easily.

Maintenance data didn't give her much more than the seven months she already had. Icerocket dutifully searches names, coming up with very little--

Until.

bemusedamusedthe-- "Muse," Hafidha finishes, already clicking the link.

She holds the coffee mug in her hands as the photograph emerges. It's a tiny painting, postcard sized, a Monarch butterfly on a milkweed. It is exquisite, and it had been for sale for one hundred and fifty dollars, marked as sold.

There are one hundred and twenty-five comments on the entry. Hafs mouses down to the next entry: A pair of shoes, dropped haphazardly on a tiny, glittery purse. The attention to light gives an air of harshness to the scuffed stiletto heels and loose sequins; there's something chilling about it.

Price, one hundred and fifty dollars. Also sold.

Twelve comments.

Hafidha scrolls up, looking at dates: the shoes were posted June 2nd. The butterfly painting, June 3rd.

There are no postings after that.

Hafidha still doesn't click to read the comments on the last entry. instead she continues back in time, looking at each daily offering of a painting, weekends off, priced at the same one hundred and fifty dollars, some marked as sold, some not.

Then and only then does she start poring over comments.

"Your daily paintings were a glimpse of beauty I watched for every day..."

"So disappointed not to see any more..."

"Did you get a gallery showing, working with bigger media?"

"I love your work. I wish I'd bought one myself but I never made up my mind in time..."

"Does *anyone* know where bemusedamusedthe is? What she's doing? Why she disappeared like this?"

"Please come back!"

Hafidha blinks away the blur at that comment. She's already capturing the pages, the comments, the images hosted at Flickr. The computer can do it for her while she hugs a mug of cooling Sumatra in her hands and just breathes.

Please come back.

"Hey, Wabbit."

"Chaz," Hafidha whispers. "Chaz..."

His hand on her shoulder, then stroking across her back to the other. "Hey hey now. What is this?"

"I think I found another one. I think... She used a Livejournal, she was a painter, and she'd post a picture of a new bitty painting every day, like postcard sized? She'd post them every weekday and sell them for a hundred and fifty dollars and then she just...stopped..."

"Easy, now."

Hafs reaches for her mug, drinks cold Sumatra, goes on. "This comment thread is from people who friended her journal asking where she is," Hafidha says, and clicks the back button. "This is her work."

Hafidha wheels down the page slowly, looking at each little painting. Some are landscapes, others still life or object studies. Every one is meticulous in detail and luminous in mood, capturing a scene or an object and imbuing a response in oils.

When Hafs reaches the bottom of the page, she clicks for the next, and gasps.

It's a slice of an old-fashioned dressing table--cut crystal cream jar matching a boar bristled brush and comb, Irish crochet lace runner, an open jewelery box...

And in that box, a pink enamel pin shaped like a chrysanthemum.

Act III

amusedbemusedthe has a bulletin board all to herself--covered in printouts of her paintings. The dressing table piece is scarcely a month old, but Hafidha can't find a listing for the chrysanthemum pin from either of the three eBay identities "John Victor" has, and SixApart *has her on hold.*

Hafidha Gates leaves that canned music on speaker while she dives through all of amusedbemusedthe's account, noting with satisfaction that she, like many Livejournal users, has a first entry dated from before her journal's creation, locked to private.

Hafs knows what is in that post. Personal information and an emergency contact, that SixApart can get to in case of some kind of emergency. She'd like to get permission, since she can. Because there isn't enough--yet--for a warrant or court order.

Meanwhile, she's searching through this little corner of LJ for clues, contacts, connections...

Finally, a voice instead of muzak.

"This is Hafidha Gates of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I would like to retrieve some first post information on a Livejournal account," Hafs says.

An inquiry about the reason for wanting the information.

"The account in question was discovered in connection with a case the Behavioral Analysis Unit is currently investigating--"

A shocked interjection. "No, no, the FBI does not spend budget on making sure ordinary citizens are bad or good. Forgive my jargonization--the Behavioral Analysis Unit is an investigative unit of the FBI that uses psychology to catch certain kinds of criminals. Serious crimes, ma'am. The LJ in question...I fear that the owner is actually a missing person, and if I can get the owner's name and contact information, I can cross check with our records."

Reassured, but still questioning. "Oh no, ma'am. I only ask for the contact information this user provided as part of the First Post program. If I require any more, it will be because she is indeed missing and there is already a case in existence, and then I will be calling you back with a very official warrant to

investigate the rest. I only want to make sure she is okay, and to get her help as swiftly as possible. Of course. The account name is amusedbemusedthe, no spaces of course because that's the character maximum--you've got it? Let me write this down."

Hafidha grabs a fluffy-headed acid green pen, and then drops it, paging instead to the NCIC database. Christina Fleming, nee Nemechek, thirty-six, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, reported missing June 9th. Five-four, one-twelve, hair black, eyes brown, race black--Nemechek? Huh. Sex female...

She was listed as "unemployed" but that entry was later revised to "self-employed." No car, no driver's license, circumstances of disappearance flagged with "Mental illness," Name of reportee David Fleming, Christina's ex-husband of Philadelphia.

She's on the phone with Harrisburg PD. No hold this time; she's transferred directly to the detective. "Santiago."

A woman's voice. "This is Special Agent Hafidha Gates of the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI. I'm calling to ask about your investigation of Christina Fleming, maiden name Nemechek. She was reported missing June fifth?"

"I'm glad you caught me here," Detective Santiago says. "One moment, I'd like to have the case in front of me. I'm surprised to hear from you--Ms. Nemechek doesn't qualify for Missing White Woman Syndrome."

"Lucky for us the Behavioral Analysis Unit is not the media," Hafidha says.

"Lucky thing. Here it is. Reported by her ex-husband, who if you don't mind me saying is one arrogant sonofabitch."

"Arrogant enough to--"

"Kill his ex-wife and then report her missing? I'd like to say yes, but his alibi is utterly solid. He was at a company ocean fishing excursion from before she went missing until the day he made the report--says that he went to meet her to give her her living allowance since--according to him--she didn't have a job, and she never showed up."

"The ex-husband's a creep?"

"I saw his type all the time on domestics. He's calm and collected, she's a hysterical wreck, he's believed, she's too cowed to say anything and the police believe she's a madwoman anyway." Hafidha can hear the snarl.

"And were there calls like that in their relationship?"

"One. Christina filed for divorce three months later. Seems David banks on

his reputation, and wife-beating would spoil that. He let her go, but set conditions that he would only pay her alimony when they met in person, in a public and neutral place. Unusual."

"Yes, well. That type doesn't like to let go," Hafidha says.

"No they don't. You got anything help me nail this guy? I went over him with a fine-tooth comb. He wasn't there when she vanished..."

"You're thinking he hired someone to kill her?"

"It's a possibility, but I'll admit to you, I don't like the guy."

"He doesn't sound charming. You said, 'according to him, she didn't have a job.' What's up there?"

"She was an artist. A painter. She had a cool little business going on the Internet--"

"The postcard paintings. That's what led me to her."

"And she was making three times the amount her ex-husband was giving her just from those. She freelanced commercial art on the side, illustrating manuals and textbooks, even digital art--but he just looked down his nose at all of it."

"Did you find anything of interest on her computer?"

"Funny thing there. It was blank."

"I suppose that would be too much to hope for. Did you find any evidence that she was seeing somebody?"

"One thing. A month before she went missing, she got a prescription for the Pill. Other than that, no evidence of who she might have been seeing."

"Detective Santiago, you have been great," Hafidha says. "And while we have been talking, I've been requesting case information. You wouldn't happen to have anything that didn't make it to the computers?"

"I'll fax the whole thing, just in case. You coming up to Harrisburg? I'll put coffee on..."

"We're probably coming, and I will take you up on that."

*

"But that doesn't make sense. All the victims we have so far are white," Daphne says. "The crimes have a sexual component to them--"

"Considering these women are theorized to be substitutes for the UNSUB's

rage against his mother, I find that pretty creepy--"

"But the point is that cross-racial sexual crimes are rare. Not impossible," Daphne forstalls the question even before Hafidha can correct her. "But if Christina Nemechek is one of fishfood's victims we have to look at the race as a break in the pattern."

"Well, believe in the impossible, because the marvelously forthcoming and making-coffee-as-we-speak Detective Santiago gave me another factor in the pattern--the personal computers of Belinda Green, Christina Nemechek, Jacqueline Kincaid, and Teresa Lee Strong were all wiped clean. John Victor is obliterating his tracks, and while we are finding more charges to hang on this creep, we aren't that much closer to finding the creep."

"She had two creeps too many, it seems," Daphne agrees. "Do you think that telling the detective that we were coming was a bit--"

"Presumptuous? I'll drive up there myself, take the weekend."

"I'll go with you," Daphne says.

"And me," from Chaz, walking into the conversation as if he'd been there all along. Daphne and Hafs both swivel--one in her chair, one on her heels--to face him.

"I've been in contact with her mother, Mahalia Nemechek. They locked up Christina's home and kept it like a shrine. If there's anything to learn there we can find it."

Daphne nods, and tugs on the hem of her shirt. "Right. Where she lived, how she lived, interview with friends and family--"

"I need to be in the same room as that computer," Hafidha sighs.

"Harrisburg is close enough that we can just drive. And Daphne," he said, handing her a file, "Race may not be a break in the pattern."

Daphne opens the file to a snapshot of Christina Nemechek. Hazel-green eyes stare back in amusement, narrow, up-tilted nose, high cheekbones, honey and buckwheat hair styled in big curls around skin the color of aged ivory.

Daphne blinks. Hafs peers over her shoulder, and says, "Oho. Christina Nemechek, I presume."

*

Hafidha glances up from a lapful of kid mohair yarn and a crochet hook to watch a motorist stare pop-eyed at Chaz's notion of a lane change, with enough time to smile apologetically. They'd made it in good time, even with the stop for second breakfast, and now Chaz follows the map he'd looked at

earlier this morning to the police station, while Daphne looks over the too-thin report on Christina Nemechek.

"Didn't anyone realize that the NCIC report was completely inaccurate in giving her description? Everything on the sheet is completely wrong if you look at a *picture* of her," Daphne says, tossing the file down in disgust.

Hafidha winds Kidsilk Haze around her fingers, already chaining her way across the row and counting double-chain increases. "The One-Drop rule strikes again. The problem is that the barest content of the report is true, if not accurate. Though the hair? That gives me something to ask about."

"Like why her ex-husband said it was black?"

"She might have had it colored," Chaz says. "The man didn't know anything about her life beyond the meeting he forced every month. She could have had it lightened after the last time he saw her, and that could be another insight for victimology."

"Hair lightened, birth control pills, erased computer. Put it all together and I see an Internet romance. Still," Hafidha says. "If I can get anything off that computer...How did he do it, that's my question. Did anyone see him at her house?"

"That will depend on her neighbors," Daphne says. "Let's hope so. Parking spot," but Chaz was already sliding into it. "Heh, what am I thinking."

"You're getting better at not scaring people to death with your driving, baby bruddah."

"Actually, it's just that you guys trust me."

*

"Are you able to tell me that your interest in Christina Nemechek is not connected to any other missing women?"

Detective Santiago asks the question with a couple of matchsticks worth of hope in her tone, while looking up at Chaz. Over six feet tall herself, it may be an uncommon event. Chaz, for his part, shakes his head as he fumbles for something in a file, avoiding the handshake.

"I'm afraid not," Daphne answers, and when Detective Santiago turns warm brown eyes to her, offers her own hand in compensation. "I'm Special Agent Daphne Worth."

"Detective Carmela Santiago," she responds automatically. "I have a meeting room we can use, it'll fit the four of us, and I've got coffee."

"Is there someplace like a bakery nearby?" Hafidha asks. "We spoke on the

phone. Please call me Hafidha."

"If you'll call me Carmela," the tall detective answers. "There is. Across the street, half block west."

"Be Right Back," Chaz says, and he's out the door in moments.

Detective Santiago watches the exit but doesn't comment. "So you're looking into a serial murderer?"

Daphne answers. "Yes. And for the moment, we'd like to work on this quietly. Media attention may have an undesirable consequence."

"You don't think Christina Nemechek is still alive."

"We can't give up on the possibility that she is still alive. Or that our UNSUB hasn't chosen another victim," Hafidha answers. "I'm very curious about Ms. Nemechek's computer. Is it here, or at her home?"

"It's at her home," Detective Santiago replies, and waves Daphne and Hafidha to follow. "We were allowed to do a very careful search, with Christina's mother and sister supervising to make sure everything was put *exactly* back where it was. We did it with their permission rather than get a warrant, and their knowledge of the house and its contents were helpful."

The room where Christina Nemechek's file and evidence wait for Hafidha has a lot in common with a schoolroom--the walls a minty green, the windowsills blessedly untouched by paint a soft red-brown, the lighting fluorescent tubes interspersed with twirling ceiling fans painted the same green.

Hafidha half expects a black-painted chalkboard and striped felt erasers, but a whiteboard perches in its place, blank and clean even of the caught dry-erase marks on the edges, but the table is all the heavy, scarred real wood Hafs could ask for. The wooden chairs roll on casters and swivel, and Hafs kicks hers away from the table and lifts her feet to let it spin higher.

"First, I have two guesses. You didn't find any data on the computer."

"We did have a tech look at it but he said it was wiped," Santiago says, from the long end of the room. A kettle whistles, and Hafs glances up just as the scent of dark roasted coffee hits her nose--

"Oh saints and stars. That's a French press."

"Cop shop coffee is a tradition, but why suffer?" Carmela sets the glass jug down where Hafs can keep a hungry eye on it. "You said you had two guesses."

"You know that there was a piece of jewelery missing," Hafs says. "A brooch, made of gold and pink enamel. In the shape of a chrysanthemum."

Carmela pushes the plunger down on the glass jug, pours a cup with an inch of clearance from the rim. "That's a very precise guess. With room?"

"Please."

Daphne gets up to fetch a glass from the drink station. "I'll just have some water. Detective Santiago, do you know if Christina had told anyone that she had met a new man, or were the birth control pills a surprise to her relatives?"

"Do you even need to read my case file?" Carmela looks between Hafs and Daphne, then her gaze goes to the door, where Chaz holds two white boxes from the bakery.

"Well, thank you, baby bruddah, but what did you get for Daphne and Carmela?" Hafidha asks.

"They're stacked two deep in these boxes," Chaz says, offering the first. "Pain au chocolat."

"Give us," Hafs says, and opens the box. "Ohhh. These smell real. Daphne?"

"You'd better take two if you want two," Daphne says to Carmela. "They'll be gone before you know it."

"There's a dozen in that box."

"Not for long."

Act IV

"I saw a barbecue place back there," Hafs says as she gets out of the feebmobile. "What would you recommend for lunch, Detective Santiago?"

"You--are thinking about lunch now?"

"Oh no," Hafs answers. "After we've had a look around. This is a very nice block."

It was. The residences of the North Sixth Street district were often crumbling, many homes boarded up, but this short block of five attached townhouses had the touch of care--fresh paint, repaired front porches, flower boxes.

"Christina, apparently. That one's hers," Carmela replies, pointing to the red-brick and gothic arched unit second from the left. "She bought it, got to know her neighbors, got them talking to each other, looking out for each other, and had her family doing a lot of the renovations. She had them do repairs for her neighbors. She made them allies."

"Give my girl time, she would have run this whole neighborhood," a new

voice says, and a stout woman stands before Christina Nemechek's front door. "With pride, and unity. She always made things more beautiful. It was her gift." Carefully rollerset curls sway around her ears as she pushes the screen door wider, still standing in the threshold. She looks Hafidha over frankly, and nods. "You have it too. You know colour, and comfort. Never saw a lady from the FBI dresses like you."

Hafidha holds her laptop bag in the left hand to offer her right. "I'm Special Agent Hafidha Gates. I'm their computer expert. You must be Christina's mother."

"I'm Mahalia Nemechek. Never saw a computer expert dress like you. You make that crochet?" The woman nods to Hafidha's lacy, wide skirted overdress, deep green over an undyed jersey dress, high necked and long-sleeved.

"I did," Hafs agrees.

"Chrissy has some of my doilies," she says. "Come you all inside. I made lemonade--ooh, aren't you tall, young man. Come in, the parlor's cool."

Hafidha follows, moves to the parlor at the left, stops to get a real look. A dim room, but it smells of furniture wax and lemons; a ceiling fan stirs the air. An octagon-shaped rug borders space for six chairs to sit and have tea--a table shared by two seats. No two chairs share the same shape, their covers identical teal canvas.

"She did this herself," Daphne says. "That's a neat idea."

"Creative, resourceful, determined," Chaz agrees. "Determined to put her identity on every square inch of this room. There isn't anything in here that wasn't made or repaired or converted by her."

"Or her family. Sit you down, all of you. Young man, take the big chair, that's right."

"I'm Special Agent Charles Villette, Mrs. Nemechek. And this is Special Agent Daphne Worth."

"You're all looking for Chrissy. What do you think you can find here, after the police looked? They searched everything." Mrs. Nemechek pours lemonade into tall collins glasses, hands out one to each. Hafidha sips, expecting the sweetness of powdered mix, but the tart flavor comes from a lemon and only enough sugar to smooth it out.

"We look at different things than the police do, to enhance the information they gleaned from their search," Chaz says. "We look at behaviors, personality, and search for the character."

"You're profilers," Mrs. Nemechek says with a nod. "That's what you were doing. Looking at this room, making a profile of my daughter." She sits back, looks at Chaz, Daphne, Hafidha, waits for a demur or deflection. When they all nod, she lightly slaps one knee and nods again, and looks pointedly around the room. "My girl put her heart into this house. That no-good ex-husband, David-- he hired decorators, had that place all done up like a museum, looking like nobody lived there. What you see here--it's her. It's all here, and if it will help you find my Chrissy, then you're welcome to look."

"Thank you, Ma'am. Your daughter is a skilled artist," Hafidha says. "It was her miniature daily paintings that led her to us. Mrs. Nemechek, one of the paintings had a brooch in it, a pink chrysanthemum."

"She bought that on the E-Bay," Mrs. Nemechek answers, curls bobbing again. "She bought a lot of things there, for the house. Fabric for the chairs in the dining room, her teacup collection, oh, all kinds of things. She crawled all up in the attic here, at my house, she sanded and re-finished and had a hand in everything. Now I suppose you want to see it all. You're wanting to look at her computer, Miss Agent Gates?"

Hafidha nods. "Yes, Ma'am, I would."

"That would be in her office. It's upstairs. Leave the glasses, I'll get those," Mrs. Nemechek says, and Hafs follows her up the long stair to a small room at the back of the house.

"She had the back wall's re-wiring done up. This house was built before there was much electricity. The lights were gas." Mrs. Nemechek points to long pipes along the moulding on the walls. "Wires go through there, it's all grounded, and she had this room done up special for the computer. Are you needing anything?"

"This is perfect just like this, Mrs. Nemechek, thank you." Hafidha says, and lays her laptop bag on the desk.

"That's a funny bag," Mrs. Nemechek says, and leans forward to look more closely at it. "Those eyes. It's like those puppets on Sesame Street."

"I watched that show every day as a kid," Hafs says, and slides out her laptop, reminding herself to use the keyboard and the mouse.

"Chrissy did too. And all her brothers and her sister. I swear they learned to read, watching that show. And a little Spanish. They could sing all the songs."

"That's how they get you," Hafidha agrees, rolling a wooden chair out of the way. "The songs."

When Hafs drops to her knees with a penlight, Mahalia makes a noise of dismay. "Your pretty dress!"

"Machine washable," Hafs answers, and plugs her laptop into a surge protection bar. "And there's no dust down here, Ma'am." She's back on her feet and in the chair, smiling at the woman hovering nearby. "It's all very tidy."

She pulls herself back to the table, slips on nitrile gloves, and examines the tower before her. Footsteps up the stairs, not taken two at a time--Daphne. A quick glance over her shoulder confirms it, with a little wave.

"Hello there, now let's see what you've got," she says softly, and pulls a pocket driver set from her handbag. She's got the sides off the case and a light shining on the boards in a minute. "Checked for fingerprints, I see.."

"This isn't a bad machine at all. AMD chipset, nVidia graphics card, *tons* of RAM, Seagate Hard drive...she researched. or she knew someone who knew hardware well enough. Now let's juuuuust...there."

Hafidha slides the hard drive loose of its connections and nests it gently inside an IDE drive enclosure. "I'm going to look at this hard drive with some data analysis stuff on my laptop."

"Hafidha is our unit's technical analyst," Daphne explains. "If there's anything to find on the hard drive, she will find it."

"I don't even know how my television works," Mahalia says with a rich chuckle. "I press the button and pay the bill and everything between is magic. You must really love them."

"I do," Hafs says, her hands on the keyboard. "Okay, now I'm scanning. The hard drive isn't blank. there's still data here. It's just corrupted, degraded...but I think my program can handle it," Hafidha says, and stands up. "We'll just let that run. Now, sometimes artists will keep journals, idea books, but your daughter didn't write in hers, the report says."

"She drew every day, never took a day off. She did her paintings, those little ones. Not every day. She'd go out every day, walking somewhere, and take pictures, and then she'd take them home and draw from them or paint from them." Mahalia answers. "Even when she went on vacation--she would do that, go away for three days, and she'd come back with sketches and paintings and work--she drew pictures for medical books, she designed quarterly reports--she made a lot on those, so she could draw."

"Did she have a camera?" Daphne asks.

"A digital camera her brothers gave her for Christmas. She took it with her. Miss Hafidha, Miss Daphne...please. Please tell me what you know about my baby girl. Is she dead?"

Hafs glances at Daphne, and then to Chaz, standing in the doorway, Detective

Santiago behind. "Mrs. Nemechek, we have a lot of information that forms a picture for us. A pattern that helps us fill in the missing pieces, shows us where to ask the questions, but they are mostly very good guesses."

"We can tell you what we guess, but we might be wrong. We could give you false hope," Daphne says, and nods at Carmela's opening her mouth to interject. "Our best guess at the moment is that she went to meet someone. Now you said in the initial report that she didn't have a boyfriend. Would it be normal for her to tell you about anyone she was dating?"

"We didn't talk about that," Mrs. Nemechek says. "I didn't want to ask her if she was seeing anyone interesting. I didn't want to remind her that she wasn't married. Chrissy's husband was a nightmare, you understand. He assumed she was white. Light eyes and freckles and she wore her hair straight--She cooked for him, he saw her neat little college apartment--poor but proud, and you know what I think?"

Four nods for her to go on.

"I think he thought a poor girl would be better for his needs. Someone to keep grateful. Someone to keep down, you see? He didn't even know her three months before they eloped, the deal done before she'd graduated--and that was their first fight. He said she didn't need a degree, she was his wife. She insisted, and wouldn't give in, and she graduated. She was the first," Mahalia says. "The first of her family to graduate college. We came. We all came. From miles around. Her aunt Odette and her uncle Jack and all her cousins, all come to kiss and cry, and he hid it well. But I wish I'd known, I wish I'd seen... I wish I could have done something.

"She made a mistake. An honest mistake. And I think he pushed it down, because to suddenly divorce his wife because she was black--that man cared a lot about appearances. He thought a lot of himself. He probably thought it made him *better* in the eyes of others. Colour-blind."

"I've heard that phrase before," Hafidha replies.

"Bet you have, beautiful tall girl like you," A fast smile for Hafs, and she goes on. "He controlled everything. But I didn't raise my girl to knuckle under. After it was over, I didn't want her to think that I was nagging her to get married again and start giving me grandchildren, so I never asked her if she'd met anyone nice. I wished that she would meet a nice man--or a nice woman, someone to be there for her. But that man--you know about the alimony."

"That he insisted that they meet in person for the payment," Chaz says with a nod.

"Yes. And she'd be so angry, the day before, the day after. He couldn't bear not controlling her. But I don't think he was responsible for my Chrissy

disappearing. She'd never go anywhere with him, or on his say-so. If she saw him walking down the street she'd cross it to get away from him."

"So who would she go with, Mrs. Nemechek?"

"She would have had to believe that he was safe," Mahalia Nemechek answers. "She would have thought that she knew him. She would have thought that he cared about the things she cared about. She would have talked to him for a while, but she doesn't go out to meet people--you think she talked to him on that computer," Mahalia says. "Like eHarmony or one of them dating services."

Hafidha is too good at what she does to glance at Daphne or Chaz. "Your children didn't get away with anything, did they, Mrs. Nemechek."

Mahalia smiles, waves one hand. "I read Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers when I was young," she says. "These days Grace Edwards, Sara Paretsky, Barbara Hambly... I love mystery stories. Doesn't matter if I work out who did it before the end."

"That happens a lot?"

"These days," Mahalia nods. "I don't mind not being surprised. So when you fix up that drive, you can find where Chrissy went on the computer? Find her e-mail and see who she talked to?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's exactly what we'll do," Hafidha agrees. "From her computer, we can ask for more information from the companies she dealt with if we need it, but her drive will tell us who we need to ask."

"He did that," Mahalia says. "The man you're looking for, the one who took her. He put one of those viruses on her computer, so he could destroy her hard drive any time he wanted to. Can you fix it?"

"I will fix it. In fact, I should check to see how it's doing...excuse me a minute, Mrs. Nemechek."

Chaz starts asking Mrs. Nemechek about whether Christina went to jumble sales or thrift shops for her decorating, and Hafidha bends over her laptop, purposefully placing her hands on the keyboard. Many of the files are reconstructed, but some are too corrupted to repair. It would have to be enough.

Hafs mouses through the directory tree, noting that Christina's history and bookmarks were among those too corrupt to reconstruct completely. Targeted, possibly. It's what she would have done. She listens to Mahalia talk about Christina's teacup collection and clicks manually to open up Thunderbird.

It happens while the load splash is up. A buzzing, twanging instant that sours

her mouth with the taste of metal, a bit of code sending a ping she didn't send--

Hafs pinches off her internet access with an annoyed flare of her nostrils...and then lets it loose, watching the little distortion speed away.

"Guys," she says, straightening up, "I found a Trojan."

Act V

"You set it loose," Daphne says, and lets her head fall back on the headrest with a thump. Harrisburg is behind them, Christina Nemechek's hard drive carefully wrapped in an antistatic envelope tucked inside a bubble mailer, sealed in a ziploc bag with an Evidence sticker on it, relevant paperwork stacked beneath.

"I set it loose," Hafidha agrees. "Impulse, but I think it's fine. I want the guy to freak out a little bit."

"He'll go to ground," Chaz says. "Or else he'll want to prove his wits."

"But you don't know which," Daphne says.

"He'll want to see who restored his hard drive. He'll want to know who is after him. He won't be able to resist. And while he's watching, he's going to see a technical analyst who plays World of Warcraft. Chaz, you feel like taking Unguilded out for a spin and driving the twinks of Emberstorm insane?"

"Me and Daphne?"

"You and Daphne. I'll bake you a pie."

"Apple?"

"Apple."

"But what will you eat, Wabbit?"

"I'll manage. Wish we could have tried that barbecue, though," Hafs says. "Speaking of, I'm starved, and I don't want to eat the other Powerbar."

*

"No one on defense," Daphne calls. "Again."

"Going back," Chaz responds, and the green-haired troll lopes across the field, returning to Warsong Hold. "Oh hi, mage headed for tunnel--"

"Box him in?"

"Yup."

"Daphne, you have a goat on the roof, hold by the flag," Hafidha cuts in.

"You saw that while you were making us pie?"

"That's a 51 inch LCD, honey. I can see his nose hairs."

Daphne keeps her gaze locked on the screen of the guest laptop she's using. "It's too big, I don't see how you can play like that."

"You get used to it," Hafidha says. "There he is again."

"Saw him," Daphne answers, and hits the draenei with a scatter shot, lays down an explosive trap, and jumps violently backwards, firing mid-flight. "How you doing, Platypus?"

"Coming," Chaz responds, and arrives just in time to click on the dropped Horde flag. "Ninja return!"

"Typical, I do all the work, you swoop in for the glory," Daphne says. "Wanna try and break that turtle?"

Chaz stretches his legs and raises the laptop, settling it back on his thighs. "We can if we get a healer."

"I have to be Hafs right now." Daphne practices running Hafidha's troll hunter, jumping, and twitching the mouse so her character faces the way she came.

"I'm apologizing for the inconvenience with pie. Two ovens' worth. Two!" Hafs holds one aloft like a trophy, and slides it into the oven and sets the timer.

"But what will Chaz eat?"

"Fried chicken," he says. "That I will make, while you are me. How's the UNSUB snare?"

Hafs doesn't need to look up from washing the mixing bowls. There's no disturbance in her hived off network, no dissonance of an intruder. Holding that small piece in her mind is easy. "He hasn't found it. Maybe he ran."

"You think he would?"

"If he's smart, he did. But curiosity kills the cat. Nearly done?"

"Alliance is holed up in their base. I'm ready to throw the match just to get out of here," Daphne answers.

"Yeah, do it. The pies are in. I'll shake the bait a little more."

Hafidha puts her good rolling pin back in its place, gives the counters a once-

over with a rag, and tags Chaz's high five as she flumps down on the couch. "Switch."

Daphne hands her one laptop, Chaz hands his over to Daphne, and Hafidha manually alt-tabs out of idling in Orgrimmar to mimic a baseline tech looking over a task in the background. She opens Thunderbird on Christina Nemechek's hard drive again, and sets the little packet free--

It's bigger, this time. Only 16 bytes bigger. As small a Trojan as she could manage ...and she watches it ping and bounce and leap across continents, until it stalls on a server in Cambodia. "Oh hell. He's got his data stopping offshore."

"What?"

"Basically the program that he was using to tell him whenever Christina Nemechek used her computer doesn't go directly to where he is. It's stopped in Cambodia. Probably an account with one of their ISPs."

"Can you even *get* a warrant for that?" Daphne asks.

Hafs shakes her head and calls up the trace. "Camnet. Hmm, what the heck is--oh, ha! They're old, all right, their website brags about offering TelNet. So how did he get an account--oh you didn't," Hafidha cackles, and leans back. "Hired gun. He went over there to work. He got an account, and he kept it."

"So you can trace him by looking up all the American programmers who ever got a permission to work in Cambodia in the last fifteen years?"

"Only if he was really dumb and I break international laws."

"Are you going to?"

"No. I'm going to sit right here and wait for that packet to come out. I've got evidence sitting in my server closet right now pretending to be in Washington, which is *so* not Justice Department SOP. Let's not push it."

*

"I done caught me a wabbit," Hafidha says, and her indigo-haired troll jumps into the air, spins one-eighty, and flies "backward" at top speed--straight to Daphne on her troll shaman, and away from the crowd of pursuers trying to take the Alliance flag back.

"Did you No-Hands that Disengage?"

"Nope! All manual," Hafidha says as they run up the tunnel--Hafs dropping an Ice Trap partway up--straight into the battle at the Horde flag. Hafs checks the mental map of her network snare and watches that one dot, tiny and as irritating as a dead pixel, touching one port after another alongside her

connection to World of Warcraft servers in Washington State. "He's quietly creeping up my network. Or at least wondering how he can creep up what he *thinks* is my network."

"So he caught your addition to his Trojan?" Chaz asks over sizzles and pops. He's standing in the kitchen, carefully lowering chicken pieces coated in spices and flour into a pot half-full of hot oil. Hafs is already yearning for a piece.

"As planned. Oh no no, kitty, you don't get our flag today--" Hafs's pink scorpion pet scampers across the room in pursuit, as Hafs scatter-shots the feral druid into losing player control for the few seconds her team needs to focus attack and get their flag back.

Daphne clicks the flag for return, and Hafs, standing on the return point, wins the last cap of the match.

"Top heals."

"What can I say? I know my triage, Miss Top Damage."

"Hafs," Chaz suddenly says, and something in his voice makes her stop and turn to look.

"You can see him," he says. "What if he can see you?"

"You mean, can he figure out that WoW isn't all I'm doing."

"Yes. Hold on," Chaz says, and turns all the burners to low. Then he's standing behind Hafs, hands on her shoulders. "I don't know if this will work, but you've got one shot at this, so--"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm checking him with the mirror. I want to know what he's assuming. You're a tech. You had the drive passed off, you took another look because if you can scrape up more data, your boss will be impressed. So you're cheating a bit, checking the drive mounted remotely with authorization to the Washington servers, checking in on it with remote desktop in between Warsong Gulch matches. Proving you can hold your own with the boys."

Hafidha nods and leaves Zaiyia the hunter dancing in Orgrimmar while she blinks the big screen tv into showing a graphical representation of her virtual network.

"That's him right there," she says, making one dot bright orange--then the flight tower of the Horde capital flashes back into sight, as Zaiyia jumps on a windrider taxi for an unnecessary flight to Thunder Bluff. "And I have no clue, right? the great Girl Geek is getting hacked."

"Making it all the sweeter when he pokes his way around your security. He found your addition to his Trojan, he knows the buck stopped in Cambodia...he's going to find out what you know and why the feds looked at Christina Nemechek's computer, all without you noticing. Because you aren't noticing."

"Just going to see if I can play the auction house in peace," Hafidha says. "Too bad I left those ports open, hey?"

"Yeah, who'd think of that?" Daphne agrees. "I'm going to keep playing my Death knight."

"DKs are so OP."

"Says the Hunter!"

"He's requesting directory information..." a tiny packet trips up the line, and Hafs watches it fly across the world and back, across the dense points of light that mark the servers attached to the Internet, tracing through his path until it lands in a bright smear of computers and servers in the Midwest. "Oh got you, you punk. Minnesota," she says. "Minneapolis has a field office, close by, that's good. Who's holding down the desks here at home--" Hafs looks up to the huge LCD; it obliges by changing the display to a list. "Sol? No. Pauley. Daphne?"

"Phoning. What should I tell him?"

"Tell him to check his email, and that we've got a person of interest in the murders of Theresa Lee Strong, Jacqueline Kinkaid, Belinda Green and Christina Nemechek sitting in Minneapolis, and we need to send some field feebs over there to pick him up."

"Right," Daphne says. "And how are you doing with your bait?"

Chaz answers "He still thinks she's not noticing him."

"Because I'm trolling Trade Channel right now with Thunderfury, Blessed Blade of the Windseeker," Hafs chuckles.

"He's getting the drop on the FBI, because he's just that smart. Also talented," Chaz murmurs.

"Oh right, silly me. Meanwhile, our UNSUB has tracerouted back to me, and I have his neighborhood. Though there's a lot of apartment buildings with highspeed...got a cross street. Fourth Avenue and First Street. On screen..." Hafs makes her big LCD pop up Google Maps, zooming down and down and down until she's looking at photos of the intersection.

"Okay. That's a nice neighborhood, I'd buy an apartment there...now." The

view pops back to a map, but then a film pops over it, blacking out spots that represent buildings. "Eliminating every address where the person who owns it also lives there. This guy hasn't put down roots. He's renting, subletting, maybe from a management company. Now separating every address that doesn't have a monthly internet bill."

"You think he's hacking someone's router?"

"It's risky, but he might be that arrogant. A lot of people don't monitor access to their router, they just put up a password and leave it at that. All right. Now let's see, are any of these people named John Victor? Of course not! that would be too easy. Are any of those people first name J and last name V?"

"You think he aliases with the same initials?"

"Monograms are expensive. Annnd we have a bingo. James Vlasak rents a stylish psuedo-loft. He's in his fifth month of a six month lease at this address... and he's a Master of Computer Science from Caltech. Never works anywhere for more than a year, and oh, look. He just moved from Philadelphia last autumn."

"You *are* generating paperwork for this."

"Such a buzzkill. Tell Pauley to check his email again. And--hey Pete! We just need you to hold this guy down until we can come and get him."

"He says is he dangerous."

"Don't assume he isn't," Hafs says. "Definitely don't assume he isn't. Actually. Tell the field agents to take the stairs, and cut the power to the unit. The whole building if they have to. Or he'll format the evidence." In a lower voice, she appends, "With his brain."

"You think he can do that?"

"It's what I would do," Hafs says. "Now let's keep him busy."

Hafs logs out of World of Warcraft and starts laboriously typing an email report about how tricky it will be to restore any more data from Christina Nemechek's hard drive. She's halfway through a request to attempt to determine how such a sophisticated program could wreak havoc with erasing computer evidence when Fishfood abruptly blips out of her network.

Chaz stands up straight, and the warm pressure of his hands leaves Hafs's shoulders. Hafidha twists around to look up at him, then holds up a gentle fist.

Chaz touches her knuckles with his own, and murmurs, "Wonder-Twin powers, de-activate."

In the silence, Daphne's phone buzzes.

Chaz and Hafs turn to look at her, and she raises her chin. "He's dead. And he shot an officer, she's going to be okay, but Pauley says he only talked to them to lull them all in before he went suicide by cop."

"Can they identify him?"

"They're going to...yes, call us back," Daphne says. "Pauley says he needs to talk to the agents on site. And that he got your emails. And can you meet him on Monday."

"Yes, yes I can," Hafs agrees.

Daphne ends the call.

"If it were me, I would have taken monitoring control of the security camera network. Cutting the power was the right thing to do," Hafs says. "And may I say that I'm kind of creeped that I beat this guy by working out what would beat me."

"You may," Daphne says. "How could they have arrested him? How could they even get him in a squad car? I mean, if he can do what you can do...everything's computerized now. Everything." She sighs. "Dad's not gonna be happy."

"We couldn't have taken him alive," Chaz says. "He didn't need anyone to understand what he was doing."

*

"Hungrier than a gang of hobbits. Are they a gang?" Hafidha asks, and takes another bite out of a Ding Dong to keep her steady. Fried chicken rests on paper, blotting away the oil. It smells so good Hafs is ready to eat standing before her grill pan.

"Naw, it's a buffet of hobbits," Chaz says, putting dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, I just made it up this instant."

"Now that's the authority we need around here," Hafs says, and pulses gently sauteed mushrooms and onions into a puree with her right hand while flipping three-cheese grilled sandwiches with her left. Fast food--as fast as scratch gets, at least, and easily divisible between jammers and baselines, with pie to follow.

"Maybe we should order in. I'm gonna be hungry again in an hour, and there might not be any pie."

Daphne snorts and starts to set the table. Her phone rings again, and she answers. Then she looks up.

"Pete says they found a room full of photographs and display cases with jewelry. The computer has movies. Photographs were printed on photo paper, from digital sources. Christina Nemechek--there's photographs of her. It's--it's reasonable to assume that she is dead."

"I figured she had to be," Hafs says. "But I wish...oh, damn it."

"She helped us find him, Wabbit. If it wasn't for her, we'd still be looking. He might have gotten whoever was next."

"Nothing's going to taste good now," she says, but she slides sandwiches to the cutting board.

"Are you still dizzy, Hafs?"

"I'll live, I'm pretty sure."

Daphne picks up a fistful of flatware. "Okay. What did you do? With the…the Wonder Twins bit. You *did* something. The both of you."

"You remember the jellybean thing?" Chaz asks, between stirring cream into the saucepan full of cream of mushroom soup.

"The jellybean thing. You mean the day you got that picture of your mom?"

"That's it. I was explaining to Hafs about how I won all those guess-the-jellybeans-in-the-jar things, and she got the idea to model it on a computer so she could see how I see it--and so I could see how other people see it. So I explained, and she put it on the screen."

"We started out wondering if we could do it together, but Chaz said it wouldn't work that way. This time, though..." Hafs says, slicing sandwiches in half. "Chaz…got in front of me, used the mirror so Fishfood--James Vlasak--would believe what he most wanted to believe. That he was a better hacker than any girl wonder who could slog her way through the soul-killing bureaucracy of the feds, so he never took a moment to wonder if it wasn't too easy."

Daphne freezes in place, her fingers still on the handle of the soup spoon she just set down on a teal blue placemat.

"What?"

"You can influence people's thoughts," Daphne says. "From hundreds of miles away."

"No. I only used the mirror. And the distance was only possible with Hafs in

the link. I can't connect across computer networks. She can."

"Are you going to tell anyone?"

Hafidha looks at Chaz just as his mismatched eyes drift and catch hers.

"What do you think they'll do if we tell them?"

"You think they'll get scared."

"I think they'll get the guy with all the keys who was going to kidnap E.T. Celentano would have a cat," Chaz says.

"Reyes would--" Hafidha goes silent, looks at Chaz, at Daphne. "I don't know what he'd do. And I don't want to speculate. And I don't want to *know,* right now."

"We'll decide together," Chaz promises.

"Pinky swear?"

Chaz holds his right hand up. Hafs links it.

After a moment, Daphne does, too.

Courage

Ashton, VA, August 2011

"I've been thinking about Daphne," Hafidha says.

"I've thought of her too," Katharine Allison says. "It hurts?"

Hafidha nods. "The Bug loves it when I think about her. About how I could have saved her, if The Bug hadn't won."

"The Bug wants you to think it's your fault."

"It is. I could have stopped that truck. I could have saved her with my wireless brain. The superpower of the 21st century," Hafidha says. "The Bug--"

Hafidha goes silent.

"Loves it when things go wrong." Katharine says. "The Bug couldn't have gotten better ammunition to use on you, could it?"

"No," Hafidha says. "Best thing that ever happened to It."

"Guilt. Of course you feel it," Katharine says.

"Because I'm alive and she's not. But this is different."

"Because you have a gift that could have changed things. The Bug keeps telling you the story were you were standing right there, and you would have *known* what was going to happen and that you would have been able to control that truck in time to stop it."

"What the Kat said," Hafidha agrees.

"Only you don't actually know if you would have been right there. You could have been tracking more of James Singh's life, finding the information we needed for intake."

"Could have been," Hafidha says.

"And then you'd be in exactly the same position. You weren't in the right place at the right time, and that has nothing to do with The Bug winning."

"So it's more Bugshit logic, you're saying," Hafidha says. "No simple explanation for anything important."

"And how does that sit with you?"

Hafidha thinks. "It makes it more human. The Bug wants me to think like a superhero. Wireless Girl saves the day--only whoops, institutionalized failure girl can't save anything. Bug logic."

"Bug logic."

"Kat." Hafidha says, shakes her head. "I'm being a jerk."

"That you or The Bug talking?"

"Dunno," Hafidha says. "I just realized I've been sitting here--Daphne's dead and gone, right down to the organ donation and I'm just whining me me me. I should have been the big hero. Only I'm useless. Oh, my pain, it hurts."

"Loss hurts," Katherine says. "Grieving hurts. The Victorians stayed in full mourning for a year. We talk about it like it was some stifling restriction. Dressed only in black, not allowed to celebrate--but you were allowed to grieve. You could cry. You could say that you wanted your loved one back, and that was allowed, expected, normal. Modern mourning doesn't even let you have a month before you get shamed into getting over it."

"The Bug is all over that too. Because Erik, and Daphne... Everything's fuel for It. Telling me that story that doesn't need to make sense." Hafidha sighs, leans back, consciously relaxes tense muscles. "I need this to be easier. Kat. What can I do to make this easier?"

"We've discussed a few possibilities," Katherine says. "Have you thought about them?"

"Yeah. And I'm still thinking."

"Do you want to talk about them?"

"No. Can you... Whatever it is you'd use to make the brochure. Can I read that?"

"I'll make you copies as soon as we're done."

Anniversary

Sulphur Springs, TX, August 25, 2011

The air conditioner ticks. It's one in the morning, heatwave-still, when Rosemary Gilmer Brady rolls over and says, "You can't just not talk to him."

Her husband humphs. She's been married to Jim for forty-three years. That's forty-two years and six months too long for him to pretend he's still sleeping.

"Jim," she says, and he gives up, turns over. His eyes catch the light from the streetlamp outside their bedroom window. His hair's sticking out; what used to be ashy blond turned the grey of a sky before the sun comes up long years ago. She reaches out to smooth it down. He jerks away.

"Oh, now don't go and be mad at *me*," she blurts.

He sighs. "I'm not, Rose." His shoulders are still stiff. All that rage still clogged up inside him, leaking into everything: a dirty dish, mail left on the coffee table, a car pulling ahead in traffic on the freeway this afternoon. Bitterness eating at everything.

She reaches over, touches that shoulder; eases it down from its hunch. This time he lets her. But he looks away.

"Rose, I don't want to talk about this."

"You're not sleeping."

"Yes, I was."

"You didn't sleep last night either."

His mouth quirks down. "This isn't one of your women's shows." *Where talking can solve everything,* she fills in. *Where everyone always has to do it one way and that's the touchy-feely way.*

Where the problem isn't real.

She pauses a second, looks him in the eye. "No, it certainly is not."

Rosemary Gilmer Brady's no master at putting one over on her husband either; nor does she really want to be. He gets the point.

"So you're all right with this," he says. His voice is thin and flat; he props himself up on his elbow, rustling the thin cotton sheet down. Pushing himself upward to defend.

"No," she says, and closes her eyes. She's got her own anger--that her son lied to her for--good Lord, years. Decades. Laughing behind their backs; the

roommate really a lover, the protests about not being ready to settle down, about dangerous jobs, about long hours all a smoke screen, delivered casual as you please. All that glib lying to his own mother.

And then the gutted knowing: that her son felt like he had to lie to her. To *her.* Because if he didn't, she wouldn't love him anymore.

That in some ways, he was right.

She opens her eyes, and Jim is watching her, wary and weary. Untrusting. Not sure which way she's about to jump.

"But you still need to talk to him," she finishes.

"I don't"--he says carefully, measured and controlled--"have anything to say."

"Well, we've got to find something," she snaps, "because we've only got one son."

And now he sits up straight and his eyes aren't just streetlamp-bright, and the anger in his shoulders streams straight down into two awkward clenched fists. "Why do I have to?" he says, voice spiraling. "Why's it me? *I* didn't do anything, *I* didn't change, but I have to bite my tongue, I have to go to *him*--"

"Jim--" she says.

"It *hurts*," he shouts, and catches his breath, and no matter what Jim Brady's forebears thought about showing your emotions, even in front of your own wife, there's no taking that back. There's no reeling it in. His cheeks go red. He bows his head, loosens his hands. "I'm allowed to *hurt*."

"Yeah," she says soft. It hurts.

You want things for your children: safety and comfort and a happy marriage and family to grow old with, all the things that mean the most; all the things you've treasured like a lump, tiny and precious, lodged between your heart and your skin. And knowing he'll never get to hold his own child in his arms, never bury his nose in that faint hair and breathe in deep, never feel the explosion of those first tiny steps--

Never even know what he's *missing*--

It hurts so bad, and there's no way to say it; no right way to shed one tear because if you do, you're rejecting your child. You're trying to change who he is. You're a bigot and a coward.

I understand, is what she wants to say, calm and reasoned. *It hurts, but he didn't do this to hurt us. We held him in our arms and dreamed all those big dreams and buried our noses in his little breaths of hair and were lost forever. He is our* son.

"I'm never gonna have grandchildren," spills out instead, cracked and sobbing, and Jim lunges out, folds her in his arms, rocks and rocks soothing like a fussy night and a lullaby.

"Oh Rose, my Rose," he whispers, voice roughened and hoarse, as she cries the sheets wet in the dark. "It'll be all right, baby, I promise. I'll make it right," he says.

Rose and Jim Brady have been married for forty-three years. She can hear his thoughts and the space between his words.

I can't talk to him. Not now. But I'll try.

4.01 "Bulletproof" - by Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Washington, D.C., August 2011

Such a short distance between far enough and too far, between just right and too much. A twitch of the hand is all it takes.

Her fingers are barely inside the curve of the handle, but it's enough that when she reaches toward the counter for her ringing phone, she snags the mug. It skates across the kitchen table and over the edge. She doesn't have a grip and can't get one in time. With a pop, the mug hits the floor and breaks. China, white and screen printed, scatters like leaves.

"Lau," she says into the phone, out of habit; who else would answer her cell? At her feet she can see a triangle fragment of the cartoon on the mug: the head and neck of a vulture in a cowboy hat.

"You know the first thing I'm going to say is 'Sorry.'" Esther Falkner's mellow voice is thinned by the phone speaker.

She considers pointing out that the first thing Falkner said was "You know," but time is probably of the essence. "Emergency?"

"Work, at least. I wouldn't ask you to give up a personal day, but..."

"We're shorthanded." It doesn't need saying. How much of the glue of the universe is composed of things that don't need saying that get said anyway? And how many of those things are said in spite of pain like a jabbed bruise? "I'll be there in an hour."

"Thank you, Nikki." The clatter on the other end of the line is Falkner's desk phone dropping back into the cradle.

Lau thumbs the power save on her phone and lays it on the kitchen table beside the box and the gift wrap. She squats to gather the big pieces of the broken mug: handle, a wedge of base, the triangle with the vulture.

Before she knows it's coming, she bursts into tears.

*

I know what happens in these stories at the end, so I know what to expect. In fact, I'm counting on it. That probably makes me a cliche, but I get why my fellow cliches want this ending, and maybe other people will get it, too. I want somebody to pay attention, even if it's just this once.

And I know it worked because you're reading this. You're a total stranger, but you already know more about me than my parents and teachers and acquaintances. So I'm writing this for you, as if it's a prize for getting this far. Maybe you won't believe any of it, but I don't care. If you think I'm crazy, that's even more attention. Crazies get headlines.

I have brain damage. But since nobody noticed until I went to kindergarten, the doctors don't know how it happened. I may have had it since before I was born. It affects my ability to think abstractly. I had to *learn* to use a mirror. Paintings are flat boards with colors on them. I don't watch TV or go to movies.

If that was all, it would be okay. You can sort of get along without those things.

But I also can't do math. I mean, if you put four apples on the table in front of me, then take two to the kitchen and ask me how many apples are left on the table, I can give you the right answer. But if you write "4 - 2 = _" and tell me to fill in the blank-- It doesn't make sense.

Can you get along without that? Make a list of the jobs you can get without doing math, and without visual abstraction. Now check off the ones you'd actually want to go to every day.

There's your answer.

*

One could do a lot of things with a master's degree in electrical engineering, Special Agent Arthur Tan reflected. None of them involved much public speaking. And when he'd decided to parlay his M. Sc. into a place in the FBI (and disappoint his parents as a regrettable but inevitable side effect), he'd certainly never imagined himself speaking stuff like this to people like these.

"Go ahead, Agent Tan," said Stephen Reyes, at the far end of the table in the Anomalous Crimes Task Force's briefing room. The overhead fluorescents gave his brown skin a tarnished-brass tint, and his lids were heavy over bloodshot eyes.

On his right, appropriately, sat Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner, her dark hair pulled back so tight and smooth it might have kept her from frowning. The source of her legendary poker face, maybe? On Reyes's left,

Nikki Lau sat with her elbows on the table. She was sharp-dressed and immaculate, and thank Dog for it, because the day she wasn't would be the day the world ended. Even so, she looked as if someone had scoured the shine off her.

As if in intentional contrast, Chaz Villette looked as if he'd taken to sleeping under bridges. His eyes were sunken in dark halos of skin, his shirt was wrinkled, and he needed a haircut more than Tan needed a raise, which was rather a lot. Danny Brady, in the chair across from Villette, might have been trying to hold everyone at the table upright by remote control, his spine was so close to vertical. He was almost as sharp as Lau, and might have had about as little sleep.

But I just met her, Padma had said when he brought the news home, in that way a person says the first ridiculous, illogical thing that comes into one's head when shocked. You met people, and sometimes, right after that, they died, and you never saw them again. Because the world was ridiculous and illogical.

The elephant in the room was good-sized, but it wasn't as if they hadn't already talked it to death. Now they had to clamber over the corpse and move on.

"Three bank robberies in the greater St. Louis area in the past week and a half," Tan said, and was glad when his voice came out steady and appeared to make it to the other side of the room. "All at branches of the Overland State Bank. All involved three gunmen wearing ski masks and carrying handguns. two of whom were masked. They hit the banks at the noon hour, moved fast, and took cash from the tellers and the customers. Nobody saw what they were driving."

"Why is this ours?" asked Falkner. Tan knew what she meant: *What's the impossible freaky weirdness that makes this an anomalous crime, instead of a regular FBI investigation?*

Tan drew a breath so big he could feel his shirt pull around his ribcage. "During the third robbery, one of the robbers pulled off his mask and began to shout at the customers and tellers. An off-duty police officer among the customers fired at him. The shot hit and killed a woman kneeling on the floor nearby. The officer was suspended and is under investigation, but she swears her aim was accurate and her line of fire was clear, that she couldn't have hit the bystander."

At that, Brady folded his arms across his blue dress shirt. "Well, she would."

"Yep. Except one of the bank guards swears to it as well. He says he saw the officer aim at a point a good thirty degrees from where the victim was

kneeling."

"How does all this look on the security footage?" Lau asked.

Which brings us to our next freaky weirdness, said the voice of Egon Spengler in the back of Tan's head. "We don't have it," he admitted.

Two deep vertical lines appeared between Reyes's eyebrows, and he leaned forward so fast he might have landed on his face if the table hadn't been there. "Why not?"

"The president and CEO of Overland State Bank," Tan said carefully, and stopped to make sure he had the facts lined up before he continued, "refuses to hand over the footage from the security cameras in the third robbery."

Reyes, still frowning, sat back in his chair, and Tan would have sworn he was disappointed. The other four agents stared at him as if his last sentence had been spoken in Urdu. *Oh, yeah, like you haven't heard stranger things around this table.*

"And he says that's because why?" Villette asked.

"He says he's protecting the privacy of the bank's customers."

"Warrant?" Lau's voice had a failing tone, as if, once something as odd as a bank president refusing to share security-camera footage with law enforcement had happened, nothing could be relied on.

"Yeah, there was one of those. Mr. Eriksen went to jail rather than cooperate. His attorneys, when they bailed him out, framed the refusal as a blow for civil rights in a nation, I think it was, 'under ever-increasing electronic surveillance.' They also mentioned 'habitual and unquestioning compliance with police demands' and 'the corporate-customer relationship should be protected from third-party intrusion.' It's all in the case jacket."

His summary was received with appropriately stunned silence. Tan felt almost proud of having brought the report that produced it. "Speaking as someone who has on occasion questioned authority," he added, "this doesn't seem like the ideal moment for it."

He got an appreciative snort out of Villette.

"Not to get too technical," Brady spoke up, "but that's some highly questionable fucked-up shit. Has anyone called the guy on this?"

Tan shrugged. "Apparently he's much respected and very well liked locally. The sort of person who gets to be the face of fund-raising drives for children's cancer centers."

"He's a *banker*," Lau said, the way she might say, "He's a plague-carrying

giant rat covered in puke."

"Apparently you can still get away with that in parts of the country."

Falkner coughed. Tan wished he knew whether it was a "focus, people" sort of cough, or the kind that pretended it wasn't amused. Pete Pauley had bet him twenty bucks Falkner wouldn't smile where Tan could see it. "For the time being, we'll have to settle for witness descriptions of the robbers," she said, level-voiced and grave.

"And look a little further into Overland State Bank and its employees." Reyes laid his palms on the table and nodded. "Thank you, Agent Tan, we'll follow up. You'll forward the case files?"

"Already on your desk, sir."

They all rose, and Brady held the door open and looked at Tan. Courtly, old-fashioned, and an unmistakable invitation to skedaddle back Down the Hall and leave the bug-hunters to get down to work.

So he did. He was relieved to wash his hands of the case. Of course he was.

And annoyed that he wouldn't get to watch.

*

I had a nanny when I was little, from when I started to talk to sometime in second grade. My mother called her "the *au pair*." Her name was Mari, and she was from Norway. She had short hair the color of straw baskets and pale gray eyes that were so deep-set they almost disappeared, and her cheeks were always flushed. She was shorter than all the other adults I knew, and she seemed soft and strong at the same time.

Mari read to me at bedtime. I didn't like fairy tales or picture books or anything that wasn't *real*. Maybe that was part of the brain damage, I don't know. She started to read from a kid's book of Norse mythology, and I said I didn't like it, because it was made up.

Mari asked me if I thought God and Jesus were made up. I knew the right answer was "no," even though I'd never seen them, because I'd get in trouble if I didn't believe in God and Jesus. Well, said Mari, that book was about people who were just like God and Jesus in the country she came from. So I let her keep reading.

That's when I learned about Balder. Balder the Beautiful. He was gentle and kind and everybody loved him and nobody would hurt him even if they could, which they couldn't. Except Loki, of course.

There's always a Loki.

*

"What strikes you about this?" Reyes asked when the door was closed and Brady was back in his chair.

Professor mode, Lau thought, which slowed down her response. So it was Chaz who said, "Why would one robber take off his mask, when he hadn't in the first two robberies?"

"And he's the one the off-duty cop took a shot at," Lau added. "Why?"

"Two 'whys,' to add to the one about the bank president withholding the camera footage." Reyes nodded. Lau felt a surge of satisfaction, and tamped it down. The side effect of professor mode: her undergrad reflexes came right back.

"No 'how'?" Brady asked. "As in, how did the cop manage to hit the victim if the robber was the only one in her line of fire?"

Falkner raised an eyebrow at him. "We don't know that yet."

"We need to know more about Overland State Bank and its CEO, as well as the officer." Reyes rolled his chair back six inches, which was all the room allowed, and slid out of it. "I'll call Todd and see if he can work the paper trail for us. Esther, I know St. Louis is your home turf, but would you mind if I took this?"

Falkner smiled. "Not a bit. I'm the one with kids, remember? And school starts in a week and a half."

Reyes ducked his chin in acknowledgement. "Villette, Lau, you'll go with me."

The sneaky team, Lau observed, and approved. They were the ones people tended to underestimate.

She caught Brady's eye across the table, and he nodded. With Todd retired and Hafidha in Idlewood, he was their shooter now. If they handled this right, it needn't go that way.

She was last out the door that Brady held, and they walked back to the bullpen together. "I'm a moron," she told him. "I got you a birthday present, but I broke it while I was wrapping it."

"The best present you can get me is to keep Chaz in the field until my birthday is over." A grin twitched at his lips, as if it had wrestled him and won. "As it is, I have to survive Todd. I'm gonna have desk drawers full of Jell-O or something."

"If you do, I want photos. Damn, I need to call Tricia right away," Lau said.

"We were going to try out a new yoga class tonight."

"Tell her I'm bringing ribs over instead."

"Because that's so much like healthy exercise."

She expected him to zing her. Instead, after a moment, he said, "She still doesn't want to go out to eat."

Tricia had told Lau that, too. She never knew when something would remind her of Daphne, and she hated to break down in a public place.

Kind of like Lau after her father died. She swallowed the sudden tightness in her throat. "I'll let her know you're taking care of the cholesterol."

"In the hands of an expert." When they reached his desk, he touched her shoulder, and she stopped. "Hey, stay in touch, okay? And don't walk into anything."

That was Brady code for "Don't fucking die." Not something they used to have to say to each other.

"I'm on that, bro." She held up her hand, palm and fingers flat, and he high-fived her with his usual restraint.

*

I wanted to be Balder. I'd be embarrassed to admit that, but there are worse things to want to be, and I was a little kid. I got over it. You know, if I said I wanted to be just like Jesus, you wouldn't think that was weird. Even as a kid, I could see that Balder was the Norse equivalent of Jesus, the good guy with the tragic death. Frankly, I liked Balder better.

So I would stand as still as I could in the backyard for what felt like hours, hoping the birds and squirrels could tell I was gentle and kind, and would sit on my shoulders. Didn't work.

It didn't work on humans, either. Maybe I just didn't know, at age four or five or six, how to show I was harmless. But at no time could I say that everyone loved me and no one would hurt me.

*

Reyes was glad the jet was in use by some other department. The three of them would have been dwarfed by the half-empty cabin, and there would be nothing to fill the extra space but ghosts.

Too late to get adjoining seats on the commercial flight. Villette was two rows ahead on the aisle, putting virtual push pins into maps of greater St. Louis on his laptop. If the robbery locations suggested a pattern, he'd find it.

Meanwhile, he had to risk either his kneecaps to the seat back in front of him, or his feet to the beverage cart in the aisle. At least he was young and flexible.

Lau was five rows behind Reyes. He wasn't sure what she'd be doing now; her gifts tended to call for boots on the ground and a powered-up cell phone. He hoped she was catching a nap, but none of them ever slept on the way to the scene.

Today's goal: don't get anyone killed, he told himself. The IA investigation into Worth's death had cleared him of wrongdoing, or as he thought of it, let him off the hook. Did that make any real difference to anyone in cases like this? Celentano was watching him--with Esther's help, most likely--for signs of failure of nerve.

Reyes was certain there were some. He wasn't a psychopath, after all.

He unfolded his tray table, took a notebook and pen out of his suit coat pocket, and began to list facts and questions about the three robberies.

*

I got put in special ed, of course. Except I was even an outcast by special ed standards. I couldn't draw pictures, I couldn't add and subtract...but I could memorize the multiplication tables, and I could read and write just fine. I was too screwed up for the normal kids, and not screwed up enough for the developmentally disabled kids.

In junior high I tried out for football, and made the team. Then we discovered I couldn't understand the diagrams for the plays. I wasn't a good enough player to make up for it. You'd be amazed how many sports and other extracurriculars use the kind of abstract thinking I didn't have the wiring for. It's a you-don't-miss-it-'til-you-haven't-got-it thing.

I wanted to be Balder, but that was never my destiny. My *wyrd*, it's called in those stories. I was born to be Loki: the one who can't fit in anywhere, the one nobody wants.

*

They reported to the local field office for form's sake, and to get access to cars and computers. Then they checked in to a pretty decent Marriott on the west edge of town. Lau tossed the relevant contents of her go bag on hangers, grabbed a bottle of water from the vending machine in the hall, and knocked on Reyes's door.

Chaz was already there, his laptop on the desk. Reyes occupied the not-very-comfy comfy chair, with a mug of tea on the table beside him, so she dropped down on the end of the bed, kicked off her loafers, and tucked her feet under her.

"Three points, two possibilities," Chaz said, and slid the laptop to where she and Reyes could see the screen. The robbery sites were dotted in blue. "Either this is a triangle, and the robbers' comfort zone is inside it, or it's a line leading toward or away from something."

"Or something else entirely," Lau said, since someone had to.

"Quiet, you. I'm good at this. Three robberies isn't a big enough sample to be sure, but it's significant that all the banks hit are Overland branches. There are plenty of other banks within the triangle--in fact, in two of the cases there was a competing bank across the street--but no other branches of Overland State Bank."

"So they're targeting Overland," said Reyes.

"Likely. So I mapped all the Overland branches, of which there are ten." Chaz tapped the keypad, and red dots bloomed on the satellite view of the St. Louis area. "And if I connect the dots--" He tapped again.

A solid yellow line zigzagged through the robbery sites, then split into three dotted ones. "Those are the three next closest branches to the last robbery. But only this one," he said, pointing to the red spot where the middle line ended, "moves them closer to here." He pointed to another red dot. "Which is the main banking location and central offices of Overland State Bank."

Lau considered Chaz's artwork. "They don't just want money, they want Overland. But they didn't hit its headquarters right away. They're advancing on it."

"They want Overland to know they're coming." Reyes frowned and sipped at his tea. "Hell of a risk. Someone has a grudge."

"Which is a little surprising, at least at a glance." Lau pulled her phone out of her pocket and called up the pages she'd bookmarked. "Jon Eriksen left Citibank to found Overland. Their focus is on local investments, keeping home loans within the community, supporting regional small business. They have a successful foreclosure prevention program, and an in-house credit counseling and debt reduction staff. Overland was a big sponsor of last year's Pride Festival, and collects donated food and clothing for the homeless every December in all their branches." She looked up from the display. "Basically, they're the most wonderful bank in the world."

"Too good to be true?" Reyes asked.

"Probably." She pulled up another bookmark. "Eriksen lives with his wife, Samantha, and their handicapped son, Luke, in a big giant house in Warson Woods, a far west suburb. He's a member of the Old Warson Country Club, and Concordia Lutheran Church, and is on the board of four St. Louis-area

charities--miscellaneous, no single unifying interest there. He's a pretty mainstream guy. I wouldn't have expected civil disobedience from him."

"Can he be protecting the robbers?" Chaz wondered.

Reyes laced his fingers over one knee. "Or somebody, or something. Tell me about the shooting victim."

Lau's display showed the photo the newspapers had run at the time of the shooting: a round-faced, dark-haired woman in cute narrow glasses and bright lipstick, holding a plastic cup and smiling. From the lights in the background, it was taken at a Christmas party. "Lisa Hinata, twenty-four years old, married two years ago, receptionist at the service desk of a local Chevy dealer."

"Sounds innocuous. And the police officer who fired the shot?"

"Alma Herrera. Oh, bless you, Arthur Tam--he sent the interview transcript from after the shooting, *and* her career jacket with the police department. Good grief." She looked up to meet Reyes's raised eyebrows and Chaz's focused shoulder hunch. "She's a competition pistol shooter with the police team."

"Which makes it even harder to convince anyone she wasn't aiming at what she hit," Chaz observed in a colorless voice.

*

One day in second grade I came home from school and found my mom waiting for me with a glass of milk and a PB&J. It was always Mari who did that. Mari had had to go home, my mom said. Yes, it was very sudden. She was sure Mari would miss us. But now that I was at school all day, I didn't really need a nanny, did I? I think that was the first time my mother used the word.

I snuck into Mari's room before dinner. It was clean, tidy, and empty. The bedclothes were gone, including the pillow, everything down to the mattress. The drawers were empty. The closet didn't even have hangers.

Even the lamp on the bedside table was gone. Would you take a lamp to Norway, I wondered? Maybe they didn't have nice lamps like that one, with a yellow china base.

The room looked the way I felt. She could have waited and said good-bye, couldn't she?

Suddenly I wanted to find something she'd left behind. It was as if she'd never been there at all. She was like those paintings of trees and horses and sunrises that I couldn't see even though they were right in front of me.

I stuck my arm as far as I could under the bureau, and got nothing but dust. I crawled over to the bed and looked under it.

I found a broken piece of yellow china.

I still don't know what happened to Mari. Maybe you do.

*

Sergeant Alma Herrera looked uncomfortable in her comfortable clothes. Reyes knew enough about her background to sympathize: career law enforcement, commendations, promotions. If she was going to talk to the FBI, she wanted to do it in uniform.

Instead she sat in an untenanted office in the station house, her union-appointed attorney beside her. She wore yoga pants, a short-sleeved T-shirt, and sandals, and her chin-length dark red hair was half hidden under a lime-green bandanna. Her jaw worked, as if her tongue was probing a molar, and though her hands were clasped on the table, she picked at her cuticles with a thumbnail. Her eyes never left Reyes's.

"Sergeant Herrera," he said, after all the groundwork was laid, "I understand yours was the only weapon fired in the bank during the robbery."

A muscle stood out in the side of her cheek. "That's correct."

"According to witness statements, all three robbers were armed."

"Yes."

"Why did you open fire?"

She'd answered this before. But he could see her trying to return to the scene, to make sure what she said wasn't a photocopy of her statement on record. "The one guy took his mask off, and after that, he acted different. He was waving his gun around, pointing it at people. And he was saying things like, 'Are you scared? 'Cause I'm not.' I thought any minute he was going to start shooting."

"He was excited?"

"He was crazy. Like he was showing off."

Reyes admired the precision of the answer. "But not his partners?"

"They were collecting the money. But this guy acted like he only knew about firearms from watching movies." Her lips pursed. She disapproved. "He was the leader. I thought I could get control of the situation."

"You fired three shots."

She nodded. "I had a clear field of fire. He was against an outside masonry wall, away from the windows, and all the customers were kneeling on the other side of the tables. Every one of those shots was right on center of mass." She bit her lip. "They dug two of my bullets out of the paneling, and the third one... It hit that girl. They matched it to my service weapon."

"How did the other two robbers react when you fired?"

Herrera stared. Apparently no one had asked that. "They... They pointed their weapons at me, told me to drop my gun and kick it away. But they seemed-- I don't know, they seemed calm. And they kept looking at the leader, like they were checking to see he was still there."

"And their leader? How did he react to the shots?"

"He... He was smiling. A great big shit-eating grin, like, I don't know. Like he hoped I'd kill him. Except..." She trailed off.

Reyes leaned forward and peered into her face, trying to look as sympathetic as he felt. "Except what?"

"When the girl... When everybody saw she was hit. He was like a statue. And then he mumbled something, and I thought he was scared all of a sudden. Then he went crazy. He told his guys to move it, move it, and they all ran out."

In spite of the leader's sloppy gun-handling, he hadn't expected anyone to get shot. In fact, he sounded like an amateur...in charge of two pros. How would that happen?

Reyes asked her to describe the three men, and probed each description for details. But Herrera had already given everything she'd observed: the unmasked man white, in his early twenties, brown hair conservatively cut, square face, wearing grass-stained jeans and a gray hoodie, height about five-ten, weight maybe 145, 150.

"Skinny?" Reyes asked carefully.

"Yeah. The others were about the same height, maybe shorter, but they were built."

She thought one of the others had dark skin, but it was hard to tell past the ski masks and goggles and gloves.

"Thank you, Sergeant Herrera. You've been a great help."

And Reyes thought, but couldn't say, that he believed she was right. She hadn't missed.

Act II

I don't remember a time when my parents didn't fight. Or a time when I didn't know that was what they were doing. They have a master suite with its own den and bathroom, and sometimes--often when they came home from a party or a dinner or a trip--my mom would disappear into it, and my father would follow her and close the door. Then I'd hear their television or stereo, and the sound would swell as someone turned up the volume. I never heard their voices, just the TV or the stereo.

Maybe knowing about the Norse gods made me think that was normal. Those families fought all the time. They even killed each other. Since I knew from church that we were made in God's image, wasn't that normal?

So I didn't think much about it when my parents fought. What I feel stupid about was not noticing when it got physical. My mother would be stiff some mornings, or she'd limp, or she'd make an excuse not to get out of her chair, or bend over. From family photos around that time, it seems like she wore long sleeves a lot.

*

The Benedictine Monks hadn't made it past "Media vita" before Lau had pulled over to the curb of the winding shady road and thumbed the green button on her phone. "Hey, Chaz. Whatcha got?"

"The tech guy who handles the bank's security videos says Eriksen viewed the footage of the third robbery before he ordered it pulled off the servers."

Lau drew a satisfied breath. "So he knows what he's not handing over."

"Uh-huh. Not so happy is that the tech guy admitted he has no archive copies. Eriksen ordered them erased."

"Wait, he's refusing to hand over footage that has ceased to exist? While not mentioning that fact?"

"Makes it easier to refuse. Also to duck charges of destroying evidence and accessory after the fact." Chaz sounded grouchy. Was that caused by a shortage of lunch, or by Jon Eriksen? "The tech guy couldn't say whether the footage gives a good angle on the shooting. He only watched it through once, with Eriksen."

"But that means unless Eriksen knew what to watch for, he doesn't know where those three bullets went, either. So what's he hiding?"

"You notice none of us believe he's striking a blow for customer privacy?"

Lau snorted; inside her head it sounded like a soprano version of Brady. "We're damned cynical bastards. Though he could be protecting *someone's*

privacy."

"But only for the third robbery?"

"He didn't achieve enlightenment until then?"

"Maybe. Uncle Duke is in the house back home and working on Overland's records, by the way. But he says financial institutions are, and I quote, 'harder to crack than George Bush Senior's online dating profile.'"

"Eew. Get that out of my head."

"Too late," Chaz crowed. "They say shared pain is halved. You at the Eriksen house?"

"The end of the driveway. So I'm maybe only, oh, a mile away."

"Reyes should be at Eriksen's office by now. Call if you get lost and we'll airlift you out."

Lau scowled at the perfect, dark-leafed maples and and oaks that shaded the curving drive. They reminded her of Ohio, of following Hafidha's faint trail and wondering which would be worse: finding her or not.

Daphne had been with her for that.

The house appeared between the trees as if a curtain had been pulled aside. It followed the contour of its rolling lot, with the double front doors on street level, a deck cantilevered off the back, and a lower-story patio opening onto a wide sunny lawn and the shore of a pond. It was made of gray stone and white-painted wood, and looked big enough to be the clubhouse for a good-sized golf course.

Lau parked in the paved turnaround that led to the garage and walked up the three steps to the entryway. Samantha Eriksen had promised her she'd be home all day, but Lau wondered if she'd thought better of that and used the length of time it had taken Lau to get there to duck out for an open-ended errand.

So she was almost surprised when the door opened. She was definitely surprised to see it was Jon Eriksen who opened it.

But this was not her first rodeo, thank you. "Mr. Eriksen. I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau with the FBI." The flip of her ID folder was as smooth as a gunfighter's draw. "Your wife is expecting me."

Eriksen stood where he was, blocking passage and view both. "Yes, she called me at the office to tell me you were on your way. Why do you need to speak to my wife?"

"I'm investigating the robberies that occurred at three of your branch banks."

"Samantha has nothing to do with my business. She can't possibly tell you anything that could help."

Lau had always been good at improv. "Mr. Eriksen, our line of investigation suggests that these robberies might have had a more personal motive. We're concerned that someone is targeting you or your family."

She saw the instant when his eyes didn't quite focus on her, when his well-shaped mouth and chin went a little slack. Something in her speech had hit a nerve.

But Eriksen wasn't bad at improv, himself. He smiled when he said, "That sounds far-fetched, Agent. If someone wants to get at me, they can do it in much easier ways than robbing banks."

She returned the smile, tilted her head, shifted her weight onto her right foot. An off-balance stance was casual, intimate, nonthreatening. "You and I think so, Mr. Eriksen. But if criminals thought like us, they wouldn't be criminals. I know your time is valuable, but may I come in, just for a few minutes?"

He hesitated. Was he weighing what he had to lose, what she might see or hear, how cooperating or refusing could help or hurt him? He probably had his attorneys' number on speed dial.

A sensible man would use it. One who thought he was smarter than everyone else, though...

Eriksen's smile widened into a shiny white public relations campaign. "Very well, Agent...?"

"Lau. Thank you, Mr. Eriksen."

*

High school was better. My parents sent me to a school in Vermont for special needs kids. Sounds awful, doesn't it? But that was the first place where people took my screwed-up brain seriously, and didn't think that what worked for one of us would work for all of us.

They did tests and told me I'd already adapted a little to the damage. Neuroplasticity--as a baby, I'd been so desperate to learn to understand and talk that my brain had found ways around the messed-up parts. That was why I could manage abstraction in language. It might even be why I've been skinny all my life: the brain uses something like twenty-five percent of the body's calories, and mine was probably using even more to make up for the damage.

The doctor said I might still find ways to make my brain work more normally.

But it would take a long time and a lot of training every day, and even then, "all better" wasn't a reasonable goal.

I didn't mind. The school helped me learn ways to cope. I got my first checking account, with a bank that wanted to expand its accessibility options. The occupational counselor said I could be a lawyer or a journalist if we could find a college that would wave the math and science pre-recs for graduation.

Good news, right?

*

The vestibule of the Eriksen house was a half-circle of slate-floored open space the size of Lau's bedroom and twice as high in the ceiling. Wide archways opened on the living room, the rear of the house, and a hall that must have led to the private areas. Eriksen led the way to the living room.

Samantha Eriksen sat on one of the low couches that bracketed the fireplace. Her face was as carefully arranged as a dinner table centerpiece, and about as mobile. Lau crossed the room to her and extended her hand. "Ms. Eriksen. We spoke on the phone."

Samantha Eriksen looked past Lau to her husband before she shook Lau's hand. "I'm sorry you came all this way, Agent Lau. There's really nothing I can tell you."

Over the fireplace hung a portrait in oils of Samantha and Jon Eriksen. It was a beautiful painting: impressionistic, with light flowing over the two figures from the window behind them. For all the loose treatment of the details, the subjects were perfectly recognizable. Lau thought it might have been done only a few years ago.

"Can either of you think of anyone who might have a grievance against you? Even if it's unreasonable. Someone you might have fired, or who claims you owe them money...?"

Both Eriksens shook their heads. Samantha said, "We have contracts with companies for housecleaning, lawn care, that sort of thing."

"I've never been comfortable with the idea of servants," Jon added. "As far as the bank is concerned, we have the highest employee satisfaction rating of any company in the state. Our people come to work knowing they're making a difference for their neighbors."

He sounded as if he was quoting from an ad. Lau nodded gravely, like Barbara Walters interviewing the president. "No unstable employees? Business rivals? Former romantic interests?"

A flash of anger in Samantha's face, but Jon only said, "No, nothing like that."

"How about your son?" she asked.

Jon Eriksen stiffened. "What about him?"

"Is there anyone who would want to make trouble for him? Has he had problems with anyone at school?"

"Agent Lau, perhaps you don't know, but my son is mentally handicapped. Of necessity, many parts of my life are public, but Luke is not one of them. We've tried to provide as much privacy and stability for him as possible, so he could live something close to a normal life. He has nothing to do with the bank."

"May I talk to Luke? Does he live with you?"

"He's living independently now."

"May I have his address and phone number?"

"No, you may not. I told you, his privacy is important to us. There's nothing to be gained and a lot of possible harm to be done by you trying to draw him into this."

Jon was getting louder and sharper with each sentence. And all the while Samantha sat silent on the couch, her hands clasped hard between her knees and her eyes on her husband's face.

"I see," Lau said, because she suspected she just maybe did. "Of course, you're right. You know best what your son needs." She watched Samantha's shoulders drop, watched a silent breath lift and lower her collarbones under her long-sleeved linen shirt. "Thank you so much for your time. I'm sorry to have disturbed you at home like this." She smiled from Samantha to Jon and back (again the head tilt, so disarming).

Jon raked his fingers through his thinning blond hair. "It's all right. We know you have a job to do." It didn't sound as if he believed it, but he was willing to say it to get her out of the house.

And get out she did. She maintained her body language all the way to the car; then she started it and rolled, gentle and unhurried, back down the drive. Once out of sight of the house she grabbed her phone and speed-dialed Chaz.

"Where are you?" he asked without preamble.

"Same place I was last time I talked to you. I've been nose to nose with Jon Eriksen."

"What?"

"Tell you when I get there. Right now, call Todd and ask him to find out every

little thing about Luke Eriksen, Jon and Samantha's son. Extra credit for a recent photograph. Extra extra credit for showing that photograph to Alma Herrera and any other witnesses to the robberies you can lay your hands on."

"You think his son is robbing his banks?"

"I think we need to find out."

*

You don't have to have brain damage to think differently from other people. I'd been so concerned with how differently I thought that I hadn't realized that. But when I came home from school and told my parents what I'd found out, my dad heard it as, "Your kid could be normal if he just tried harder."

So now I was retarded *and* lazy. Now I got the "You've always been a quitter" speech, and the "We paid a fortune for your education, and you wasted it" speech.

My dad, the motivational speaker.

My mom, in a half-assed way, tried to explain things. Fathers always identify with their sons. He was just frustrated that he couldn't help me. Because really, he loved me, and that's why he was frustrated, and when he was frustrated he got angry and didn't realize he was hurting me.

Yes, she was talking about my father and *her*. Because she started to have a real epidemic of bumping into things or falling down or spraining something or pulling a muscle about the time I graduated. I told her I knew where she was really getting the bruises. Then *she* yelled at me. How could I say things like that after the sacrifices they'd made for me, blah blah blah.

I wonder if she thought the yelling would keep me from noticing she hadn't denied it.

*

At the St. Louis field office, federal budget cuts had accidentally provided them with an empty room to use. Reyes sat on a corner of the bare desk and let Chaz and Lau have the tweed-nylon-upholstered visitors' chairs. They were probably marginally more comfortable than the file cabinets.

"Setting aside whether Sergeant Herrera should have fired at all," Reyes began, and Lau and Chaz winced in sympathy, "I believe her when she says she was aiming at her target's center of mass. I also believe anomalous activity was involved. Someone in that room was jamming."

Chaz's eyebrows twitched at Reyes's use of the word. It was what Chaz and Hafidha called what they did. *Yes,* he thought in Chaz's direction, *I* am

teachable.

"Probably the unmasked robber," Lau added.

Chaz hitched himself up in his chair. "Given the likely mythologies, I'd guess the manifestation is either Force Field or Power to Cloud Men's Minds."

It took Reyes by surprise. But they'd been studying the anomaly the way the Behavioral Science Unit studied serial criminals back in the day, and for the same reasons. Anomalous abilities fell into categories, as did the circumstances prompting them.

And Chaz, who saw pattern the way most people saw shape and line and contrast, would have assembled those categories almost unconsciously.

Lau shook her head. "Force Field takes too much energy. He'd burn out."

"Not necessarily. He might have converted recently. And he'd only use it when he needed it. But it takes more energy than the alternative."

"Which would be," Reyes said, "that he made Herrera *think* she was aiming at him?"

"Takes less energy. But he'd need more understanding of perception."

"Empathy and abstraction," Lau summarized. "Remember the John Doe gamma in Chillicothe, the one who turned out not to be Lynn Van Metre? He could get so far inside someone else's head that he could use their eyes."

The phone on the desk jangled authoritatively. Reyes lifted the receiver off and clicked the speakerphone button. "Sol, you're on speaker."

"And a good afternoon to you, too, Stephen. I have treats for good girls and boys." Even his electronic voice sounded energetic and cheerful. *Retirement,* Reyes thought. *Not such a bad idea.*

"Give," said Lau.

"I'll start with Luke Eriksen. Twenty years old, attending Cahokia Community College. I'm sending his student ID photo to your phones and your nearest photo printer as we speak. He was diagnosed with a brain disorder at a very early age that interfered with his ability to understand visual abstractions and number relationships.

"He did well at Green Mountain Academy for Special Learning, however, where he was a resident student in tenth through twelfth grade. He wasn't insanely popular, but his teachers and fellow students seemed to like him. But counselors commented on his emotional immaturity. Apparently he was even more narcissistic than most teenagers, and had a hard time considering events from a point of view other than his own."

"Force Field," Chaz muttered smugly.

"Beg your pardon?" asked Todd.

"Never mind," Reyes told him. "Agent Villette was just patting himself on the back with his tongue."

"Ew?" Lau objected.

"What else?" prompted Reyes.

Todd continued, "He works for Stan and Sam's Yard Service when he's not in class. No record of a firearms permit or purchase, no criminal record. He lives in a rented room in the Sherman Park neighborhood."

Lau had produced her phone and poked at it. Now she turned the display toward Reyes and Chaz.

Luke Eriksen had conservatively cut brown hair, a square, hollow face, and a dissatisfied expression. He could easily be the man Herrera had fired at.

"And now," Todd chirped, "the financial news. Because information wants to be free, a trustworthy source leaked to me that JPMorgan Chase is in negotiation to buy Jon Eriksen's shares in Overland State Bank. Which will make them the majority shareholder."

Lau frowned. "But the whole draw for Overland is that they're locally owned and reliant on their community."

"That's very true," Todd replied. Reyes could hear the Cheshire-cat grin in his voice.

"Oh," said Lau, and slowly rocked forward with the pressure of the realization. "Oh. If word of the buyout spreads, the value of those shares could drop. At the least, the shareholders will freak."

With mock-gravity, Todd said, "At a time like this, the wisest thing a businessman can do is try to keep the waters untroubled."

Reyes wished Todd were in the room so he could throw something at him. "Up to now Eriksen has been so clean he might as well be Teflon-coated. But his son robbing his father's banks? That's messy."

"Hell," Lau replied, "that's national network news. Fox would freaking *lead* with it. *This* is why he killed the third robbery footage."

Reyes felt his smile pull at the scar tissue around his mouth. "You think Eriksen would be willing to talk to us again?"

Chaz stood up and reached a long arm for the doorknob. "I think he might if

the FBI brings his son in for questioning."

*

People think my father is a great guy. Now there's a Balder figure for you: tall, handsome, distinguished, admired, everybody's best friend. But he's not Balder. He's Thor. He's the one with the temper that goes off like a crack of thunder, who'll kick a bystander into the fire to die just for walking in front of him at the wrong time.

I wanted to go to college, try to get into a degree program like the counselor at school suggested. But my father wouldn't pay for it. Good money after bad, he called it. And if I wanted to question his judgments about money, I should think about whose judgment had put food in my mouth and clothes on my back all my life. Now that I was eighteen, he didn't even have to do that, and I should be grateful...

Skip to the result: he registered me for vocational classes at the community college. A sampler, so I could choose which of the certification programs I thought I could pass.

Food Preparation Services. Correctional Officer. Landscape Maintenance. Oh, and my favorite: Social Services, where I might even get a special certification in Domestic Violence Intervention.

I was already employed in that, though. Because that's when he stopped hitting my mother and started hitting me.

Act III

Lau's phone shivered in her pocket during the report from the two agents who'd gone to bring Luke Eriksen in. She ignored it for the time being. Because Eriksen wasn't home.

"His landlady says he told her he was going to be out of town for a few weeks," Agent Clancy said, with the flawless skepticism of the career Fibbie. She rubbed at the freckles on the side of her nose and added, "So we phoned the yard service. He hasn't shown up for work the last two days. Want us to start canvassing known associates?"

"Please," said Reyes. "We'll help you find some."

So it wasn't until Lau got back to the Marriott that she had time to check her missed calls log. Her brother's number.

Good thing I had it on vibrate. The Air Force theme is a little disruptive.

She tapped in his number and got an answer.

"Hi, Bobby. Sorry for the delay."

"Where are you?"

She smoothed her hackles; he probably didn't mean to sound as if, wherever she was, she ought to be somewhere else. "St. Louis. And don't ask me how it is, because as usual I haven't had time to find out."

"You're in the middle of something, then."

"I'm off duty for the night. I hope, anyway. What's up?"

She heard him take a breath and puff it out. "I'm worried about Mom."

"Is she sick? What's wrong?"

"It's a lot of things. She's...not herself. It's hard to get her to leave the house, even to see the kids. I don't think she's eating right. And she cancelled her last dentist appointment, said she just didn't feel like it."

Lau weighed as much of that as she could. "A lot changed when Dad died. You say she's not herself, but, well, I think she's still trying to figure out who 'herself' is now."

"Look, Nikki--" He paused for long enough that she caught up to him. She knew what he was going to say. She shouldn't let him say it. "She's lonely. Someone should be there with her. At least for a few months, until she gets back in the groove. You know how she is--she won't take care of herself if there's nobody but her to do it for."

"By 'someone,' you mean me."

If they'd been in the same room, he would be shrugging. Maybe he was anyway. "I can't do it. And frankly, you and I are the responsible ones."

The implied compliment, the statement of solidarity. *Bobby, don't try to play a player.* "I'm busy right now, Bobby."

"With what?"

"Chasing bank robbers." She tried to make her tone convey the amount of patience she was drawing on.

"The FBI has lots of agents, Nikki. Mom only has one daughter."

"And three sons."

An impatient click of the tongue-tip off the roof of his mouth. "It's not the same."

"It doesn't have to be the same. It just has to be a human being who loves and

cares about her."

He was too grown up, thank heaven, to say that ruled her out. "I'm not asking you to move in with her forever--"

"Bobby, are you afraid of her? Just...be her friend. She and I don't have a lot in common, but she thinks you're the coolest guy in the world. Go make her dinner. Bring the kids over and ask her to squirt 'em with the hose the way she used to do us. It's a hell of a lot easier than landing on an aircraft carrier."

He sighed. "Think about it, will you?"

"I *have* thought about it. I'm telling you the results. Go do this."

The call ended without either of them bringing up anything offensive the other had done during childhood. Lau considered that a win.

Brady would like this one. They regularly compared their families' expectations for them. Though lately Brady's focus had been more on his own expectations, and Gray's, and the process of bringing the two sets of expectations closer together.

Lau had already pushed the numbers to speed-dial Brady. She thumbed the hang-up. Brady was a grown-up with a real life of his own. She was still calling her friends to complain about her big brother.

"It's not *faaiir*," she whined, to make herself laugh. Her voice echoed in the tidy hotel room.

*

He started small. He'd give me a shove if he thought I wasn't going where he'd told me to fast enough. Or he'd give me a flat-palmed smack to the back of the head if I "smarted off," which was what he called it when I disagreed with him. Then there was grabbing, which left bruises on my arms, and throttling, and gripping the back of my neck and pushing my face into whatever he thought I wasn't paying enough attention to.

After that it's an easy step to slamming up against a wall, or the kind of backhand that knocks someone off his feet.

I was sort of glad he let up on my mother, but not *that* glad. I mean, Balder's mother went all over the world, getting everything in it to swear it would never do Balder any harm. She screwed up, true, but not for lack of trying. There was a distinct lack of trying on my mother's part. I know there are a lot of possible explanations for that. But I'm not Jesus, any more than I'm Balder. I feel sorry for her, but that doesn't mean I forgive her.

*

In the morning, a partial fingerprint found at the scene of the second robbery pinged the national database. It belonged to Shawn Lewis Clipman, who had been arrested at nineteen for a pair of unarmed robbery/assaults.

Unlike Luke Eriksen, he was at home in bed.

When offered a deal, he named his partners: Augustin Mercere, age twenty-six, and Luke Eriksen. The robbery had been Eriksen's idea, Clipman told investigators; he'd recruited Clipman and Mercere from their mutual workplace, Stan and Sam's Yard Service.

Clipman and Mercere were drawn in by the money. Eriksen told them anything the robberies yielded was theirs; he wasn't in it for gain. And though the other two men recommended going in very visibly armed, to subdue potential resistance, Eriksen insisted they not harm anyone. In fact, Eriksen's SW1911 wasn't loaded during any of the robberies.

According to Clipman, he and Mercere suspected a sting. But when they confronted Eriksen with their distrust, he insisted on a demonstration of his trust in them. He asked them to shoot him.

Clipman swore their shots couldn't hit him. He also swore that both he and Mercere were dead sober at the time.

He didn't know why Eriksen had pulled off his mask during the third robbery. Clipman was angry about it; in fact, he said the gang had split up over it. Eriksen would be recognized, Clipman told him, and they'd all be caught.

When Eriksen had laughed at that, Clipman decided he was too crazy to work with.

Reyes gathered a handpicked group of local field agents and police and, with Lau and Villette, outlined the plan.

"Luke Eriksen wants to be identified," Lau explained, her clear, carrying voice as authoritative as any news anchor's. "That's why he removed his mask during the third robbery. He hadn't gotten what he wanted out of the first two robberies; taking off his mask was a kind of escalation. He counted on being identified from the video footage. When Overland Bank refused to make that video available to the police, he must have been intensely frustrated."

Reyes picked up the narrative. "We can use that frustration to lure him out of hiding. Shawn Clipman's arrest is being kept from the news media. Instead, we're releasing a statement that we have no new leads in the robberies, and that without the video, we're unable to identify the unmasked robber."

Lau's eye-corner glance said she was ready to step in front of the cameras. They would need her; Eriksen's frustration could be split between his father and law enforcement, but he'd need a face to focus on. And Reyes was afraid

of what Luke might do if his father bore the sole brunt of his anger.

Villette lifted his head in a way that shifted all the eyes in the room to him. "Eriksen's goal isn't robbery; it's humiliating his father. The robberies have failed to do that. We think Eriksen will escalate further and push his timeline. He'll try to confront his father directly, publicly, in the place where he's symbolically strongest: Overland State Bank headquarters."

They would keep the building under surveillance, Reyes told them; Eriksen wouldn't be long in coming. When he arrived, Reyes's team would be there. Reyes didn't mention one of his team was the Invisible Man.

He also didn't say that the other was Wonder Woman. Bullets and bracelets was the gamma's game this time, and he didn't want Lau playing.

*

It happened because I told them I was moving out.

It's crazy--I thought they'd be happy about it. I thought he would, anyway. If you smack someone around, doesn't that sort of suggest you wish they weren't there?

I told them I had a job with a yard-care service, and had paid the first month's rent on a room I'd seen posted on a bulletin board at college. I said I wanted to keep going to school, if they'd keep paying the tuition, but I'd cover my own living expenses from now on. I'd be independent.

My mom started crying. Why had I done all this without telling them? I didn't care about their feelings. I didn't love them. I didn't appreciate what I had. She ran off to that master suite and slammed the door while I was still trying to figure that out.

Then my father started yelling at me for hurting my mother's feelings. No, really.

At least I had a comeback for that. So we both raised our voices, and he knocked me down. But this time he straddled me and punched me in the face. He pulled his fist back to do it again.

I couldn't get away. My father's tall and strong, and you probably already know I'm a scrawny little jerk. I couldn't get out of range the way I always had before. My face hurt--my whole *head* hurt. Nothing was going to keep me out of the hospital or the morgue. I *knew* it.

His fist came down at me like a missile. It slid past my face, maybe half an inch away, and smacked into the hardwood floor. I felt kind of a pressure on my nose and cheek as it went by.

Weird how clear that is, because everything else for a while is confused. I think my father was screaming (maybe he broke something in his hand?). He might have tried to hit me with his other hand, because I felt that pressure again on the side of my face, and his fingers sort of flew by, as if they were skidding off something.

After that I don't remember anything until I was sitting at the kitchen counter, shaking and sweating. I'd eaten half a loaf of bread and a pound of frozen hamburger, and I didn't stop being hungry until I finished the rest of the bread.

*

"He's here," Chaz murmured in Reyes's earpiece. "Dressed as a bike messenger and carrying a shoulder bag."

On the other side of Jon Eriksen's half-open office door, Reyes saw Lau wipe her palms on her trousers and unholster her weapon. She still wore the navy jacket she'd had on for the news cameras; they wanted to make sure their quarry identified her.

He found he was clenching and unclenching his teeth. *Luke Eriksen's not a killer. He's just a teenager past his sell-by date, who can't see that everything that makes him hurt isn't exclusively about him.* It didn't keep Reyes from remembering New York, and Daphne.

Brisk footsteps in the hall. "Hey, Dad!" a hoarse tenor called from just outside. "I hear you're not cooperating with law enforcement--"

Eriksen was three steps into the room, his weapon aimed one-handed at the chair behind the desk, before he realized the chair was empty, and he wasn't alone.

"Luke Eriksen," Reyes said gently. "I'm Supervisory Special Agent Stephen Reyes of the FBI. I'm afraid we need to take you into custody."

Eriksen spun on one foot, staggering a little with the surprise. His gun swept Reyes and Lau.

He and Lau had the boy covered. Under the circumstances, how much difference did that make?

"You can put the gun down," Reyes told him.

Eriksen's face flushed mottled red, like a child working up to a tantrum. Then he clenched his teeth and grinned. "Can I?"

Lau said, "We know it wasn't loaded during the robberies."

"It is now."

And Reyes believed him. He hadn't come to this room to confront a crowd of innocent bystanders.

"I could say you don't want to hurt anyone, but I know that's not true," Reyes said, watching the pulse throb in Eriksen's neck, watching his gun hand swing its short arc between himself and Lau. "But Agent Lau and I are not your target. Harming us will only make it harder to get at your father."

Eriksen stood trying to decide if that was just talk.

"Mr. Eriksen," said Lau, "will you at least put down your bag?" Get him to agree to a small thing. Move on from there.

For an instant, Eriksen looked as if he'd forgotten he was carrying a bag. Then he glanced down at it, and an almost-smile moved his lips. "No problem," he said. He shrugged it off his shoulder and dropped it on his father's untenanted desk, all the while twitching the gun between Lau and Reyes.

"Why don't you shoot me, now that you've got the chance?"

Reyes felt more than saw Chaz step into the hall in front of the open door.

He answered, "Because we don't want to shoot you, Mr. Eriksen. We want to bring you in and talk to you. Please, just put the gun down."

"Really." It wasn't a question. "I think you haven't shot me because you know you can't. I think I'm gonna walk out of here."

They'd talked about this back at the field office. If Eriksen called their bluff, what would they do? Surely three of them could lay hands on him, bear him down under their weight.

It would depend on the manifestation. Their best bet was to talk him into surrendering.

Lau shook her head. "I think you won't do that until you know you've hurt your father as much as you can. If you make a statement to the police, won't that do the job?"

Eriksen's eyes narrowed. "You lied to the news on TV. You could be lying now. You could take me in and make me disappear, just the way my father wants."

There are my chickens, come home to roost, Reyes thought, his stomach sinking through the floor.

Eriksen was watching Lau's face; he smiled when she didn't answer. "I'm gonna go now. I really have to see my dad." He took a step toward the door. Reyes heard Chaz's weight shift, and wished Chaz was Brady, with Brady's size and leverage.

Then Lau stepped into Eriksen's path.

"Lau," Reyes warned.

"Lady, you don't get it!" Eriksen snapped. "You can't touch me!"

"Sure, I can." She lowered her weapon and pushed it into Reyes's hand as she went forward. He was too startled to do anything but take it. Then she stepped in, inside the reach of Eriksen's gun. She put her arms around him and clenched her hands on her wrists.

Eriksen staggered backward, but that only carried Lau with him. "Get the hell away from me! Are you crazy?"

"Lau!" Reyes said, but couldn't find anything to follow it with. She'd done this, and he had to back her up. Eriksen had to believe Lau was on script.

He had to believe Reyes wasn't afraid for her.

"Think of me as a reverse hostage," Lau said, her head tilted to see into Eriksen's panicky face. "You don't want anyone to shoot at you. They might hit me."

"I don't care if you get shot!"

"You cared in the bank," Reyes said, his voice clogged with tension.

"That dumb-ass cop! She didn't need to do that. Nobody would have got hurt!" Eriksen's voice was rising into a screech.

"The police and the FBI are outside. If you try to leave the building now, especially carrying a weapon, they'll shoot. People will be hurt. Agent Lau--a good officer and a good person--may die."

"Tell 'em not to shoot. Tell 'em there's no point. Don't you get it? I'm invulnerable!"

The boy was almost crying. Being invulnerable ought to mean that nothing could make you cry. Wasn't that so?

"Every invulnerable person has a weakness," Reyes told him. "Have you thought about that? Achilles and his heel. Superman and kryptonite. You have one, too."

"No. Nothing will hurt me."

"Yours is physics," said Reyes. He watched Eriksen's face. It showed a growing panic and sudden despair, but no comprehension.

Chaz spoke up from the hall. "He's right. Every blow you deflect uses energy. I can't hit you with a bullet, but I don't have to. If I keep shooting at you, how

long can you keep deflecting them? It wears you down, doesn't it, until you can barely stay on your feet? How long do you think you could last?"

And from his face, Eriksen finally understood.

"Let us take you in, Luke," Reyes urged.

Eriksen plunged toward the door.

Lau lost her footing but not her grip; his charge pulled her with him. Gammas were stronger than they looked.

Reyes grabbed right-handed for Eriksen's gun arm. His fingers closed on a skin-warm surface that wasn't skin, but something hard and smooth and frictionless, an invisible halo half an inch from flesh or fabric. It was like trying to grip a melting sheet of ice.

Chaz leaped. He should have landed hard against Eriksen's chest and carried him back and down. Instead he skidded sideways across him--visibly skidded across Eriksen's unseen surface--and hit the side of the desk with a hollow thump.

Eriksen was in the hall, then through a fire-exit door.

And Lau was still with him.

*

I haven't seen either of my parents since that night.

I know this thing I have--it's crazy and impossible. But I've tested it. It's real.

Balder's gift, besides being beautiful and lovable, was to be invulnerable to (almost) everything. Since it was Balder, everyone was okay with that. But what if it was Loki who got that gift? What would he do with it? Especially after a lifetime of being the one nobody wanted?

You already know the answer to that, don't you?

Act IV

Lau could feel Luke trembling under her arms, under the glassy shielded surface she slipped and slid against as he dragged her up the fire stairs. The concrete stairwell bounced the racket of their passage back into her ears as if the building itself was shouting.

"Luke, you don't need to protect yourself. You can let go of the..." She had no idea how he'd think of that surface. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She couldn't tell if he'd even heard her. She felt as if she was trying to stay on

the hood of a moving car by hugging a side view mirror.

How many floors did the damned building have? She tried to remember the elevator panel. It didn't matter; she wasn't sure how many landings they'd passed.

Then Luke slammed into the red bar of the door at the top of the stairs and added the high-pitched blat of the fire alarm to the noise. Daylight, and a stiff breeze, and rolling pea gravel under her feet. They were on the roof.

She let go and fell to the gritty surface. She was between him and the door, and there was no one here to take a shot at them. Besides, her arms burned with fatigue.

Luke stumbled backward and fell on his ass. He dropped his pistol, crab-scuttled away from her, and stood. He scrubbed at his face with both hands. They left tarry streaks across his sunken cheeks and his forehead.

"Alone at last," Lau panted.

Luke stared, horrified. Maybe he thought she'd gone nuts.

"Luke, I need you to listen to me." She had to stop for breath, but not long enough for him to protest. "This thing you can do? That didn't surprise us, did you notice? We know what's happened to you. And you're not the only one. We can take you to a place where people know how to help you. What you've got can make you dangerous. But you'll learn to manage it, and get counselling to help you deal with your problems. You can even take college courses, I bet. Let us take you into custody, and that's where you'll go. You haven't done anything very bad. You're a good person. You deserve a chance."

With that, she really did have to stop for breath. She didn't think she'd ever talked that much in one go in her life.

"What's in it for you?" he asked at last. "If I do that?"

Oh, thank God, he'd *listened*. "You can teach us as much as we can teach you. And seriously, the thing that's made you invulnerable? It can do a lot of harm. I don't think you want that. If you're in Idlewood, you won't have to worry about it, and neither will anyone else."

"So I'll be safe..."

"Yes. You will."

He stared hard into her eyes. "But I'll be locked up. Maximum security."

She wished she could deny it.

"All my life, my parents kept me out of the way, out of sight. I bet if my

father heard about this place you've got, he'd sign me up yesterday."

"It's not like that--"

"It's an *institution*!"

Suddenly he was standing over her. Gamma-quick, of course. He crouched down and grinned into her face. "Know what the state motto of New Hampshire is?"

She floundered. The non sequitur made him sound mentally handicapped for the first time. "It's... 'Live free or die.'"

Not a non sequitur.

"I always thought that was a good idea." He grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. She tried to pull him off balance, but the gravel rolled under her shoes.

He dragged her to the edge of the roof. It had a masonry lip, knee high, and a lower projecting surface on the outside maybe two feet down. None of it was enough to break her fall if he threw her over.

It was his turn to hold her in a parody of a hug. "What are you planning to do?" she asked, and her voice wasn't steady.

"Eriksen!" Reyes shouted. He and Chaz stood in the open stairwell door, weapons raised. "Let her go!"

Luke ignored them. "Your boss and your partner think I've got a weakness." He stepped back toward the edge, and she tried to dig her heels in, to squeeze out of his hold. "They think they can find some mistletoe to throw at me."

What was it, ten stories? Twelve? "No. You can't survive a fall like that."

His arms clenched tight around her; she had to pant for breath. "No way to tell without trying, is there?" he asked brightly.

"You didn't want to hurt anyone. You still don't. You don't have to do this!"

"See you at the bottom, lady."

And the shove that pushed her away to stagger and fall to hands and knees on the gravel was equal and opposite to the force with which he threw himself backward off the roof.

She scrambled to the edge, and realized as she did that she was yelling, "No! Fuck. Fuck!"

Chaz was yanking at her shoulders, trying to haul her back. But she refused to yield until she was sure the little sprawled shape on the pavement of the

courtyard below wasn't moving.

*

Reyes knew he was hovering, and was seriously fucking glad that nobody asked him to stop. And Lau was all right, except for the shocky horror that flicked across her face when no one had the decency to distract her with questions and demands.

Chaz brought her a paper cup of water from somewhere. It couldn't have been from Jon Eriksen's office, because that was full of police officers documenting the evidence of actions they'd already been told about. But Chaz's resourcefulness in matters of food and drink was legendary.

The surface of the water quaked, though Lau held the cup with both hands. Chaz helped her get it to her mouth.

"You did everything you could," Reyes told her. "More than anyone else could have, I think."

She shook her head.

"No, he's right," Chaz said. "You did everything right. It just...didn't work."

The plump, freckled agent from the local field office--Murphy? Casey? Clancy--came out of Eriksen's office and down the hall, into the little reception area with its caramel-colored couch where Reyes's team sat. She carried a manila envelope, unsealed.

"This was in his messenger bag," she said. "I thought you'd want to look it over before it goes into evidence."

Lau reached for it before either Reyes or Chaz could. She shook the contents into her lap.

White printer paper, maybe a dozen pages, with text in Courier. Lau stared down at the top sheet, then flipped to the next, then thumbed through the rest. Finally she raised her face, wide-eyed and blank.

"It's his story. For us."

*

The body was shipped to Baltimore, to the chilly, echoing autopsy suite at Johns Hopkins where Madeline Frost did her work. She did it again with her usual precision and thoroughness. No one could doubt she'd found exactly what she said she had: no broken bones, no damage to internal organs, no contusions or lacerations.

The deceased had probably lived for several minutes after impact. Even so, no

amount of rapid response or medical skill could have saved him.

Luke Eriksen had died of starvation.

*

Nikki Lau sat in the breakfast nook of her mother's house in Reseda. Afternoon sun burned through the corner windows and onto her neck, but she stayed where she was. Her mother tugged the thermal carafe from its niche in the coffeemaker and refilled Nikki's cup and her own. Then she sat down across the table, smiling.

She did look thinner than Nikki remembered. "Have you lost weight?" she asked, before she realized the question might sound nosy and critical and any number of other things her mother might object to.

"Hah! You're the only one who noticed! You know, your dad and I always walked and played tennis and swam, but he loved his desserts. You'd be amazed how quick those couple extra pounds went off when I stopped keeping ice cream in the freezer."

Nikki decided not to tell her that Bobby had noticed, too, and thought she was losing her grip. "If I stopped keeping ice cream in the freezer, my life wouldn't be worth living."

Her mother snorted. "You and your dad. He used to take you to Dairy Queen twice a week in the summer, remember?"

"I remember," she said, and nodded and smiled while she swallowed down the tight hot feeling in her throat.

A week--she'd told Bobby it was all she could take off work right now. Reyes had more or less ordered her to take vacation time, but she felt guilty leaving even routine casework to be spread out among Brady, Chaz, Falkner, and Reyes. But she could spend a week in the Valley, mow her mom's lawn, take her out to dinner and a chick flick, whatever her mother wanted.

Whatsoever could be done, she would do.

You did everything you could.

"Bobby told me you practically ordered him to come see me," her mother was saying. "He and I have been having such a good time lately. I always left the boys to your father once they were grown up. I don't know why. But now I feel as if I'm really getting to know him as a person, and not just my son."

"He's a good guy," Nikki said, knowing it was inadequate. "And he loves you a lot."

"Don't say that in front of him. You know how men are about *feelings*."

She didn't--at least, not the way her mother meant it. But her mother had never met Chaz or Brady or Sol Todd or even Pete Pauley, who pretended to be the living embodiment of the Marlboro Man.

"That reminds me," her mother continued. "I need to get some things in order, and I don't know how the boys would feel about it. So I thought I'd see if you could help."

"Sure."

"I need to sort your father's things and decide what to keep for the boys and what to give away. I want you to give me a second opinion. And the computer--I never looked at his files, but someone should now. And go through the programs. I don't know what half of them do."

"I can start on the computer right now."

"Oh, good. I would have asked Bobby, but your father might have had things he didn't want the boys to see."

That was almost enough to make Nikki retract her offer to help. What did her mom think might be on the hard drive? Photos of her dad in women's underwear? And if so, why would it be better that *Nikki* saw them? But she gathered her courage and headed for the corner of the family room where the Dell tower lived, and left her mother to get to work in the bedroom closet.

Her father's files were the electronic version of a military man's new-made bed. If there were a way to introduce a quarter into the organization of labeled folders and subfolders and rigorously descriptive file names, it would bounce a yard high.

She found photos of fishing buddies, photos of a white-haired man she almost recognized standing next to a restored Corvette, and photos of the beach at Santa Monica and Malibu. She found copies of letters to old squadron mates, breezy and casual as a Christmas card note.

She was on the verge of deciding that her father had never committed a solemn thought to paper--or in this case, electrons--when she found the journal.

"Journal" wasn't the right word, perhaps; it was a leisurely, wandering meditation punctuated with dates, that began barely a year before he died. It was as if he'd been blogging for an audience of one.

He wrote with restrained disapproval about the gradual dismantling of the space program. He contemplated whether American military bases on foreign soil were an anachronism, or a way to shake young U.S. servicemen out of their preconceived notions. He observed that not only did Southern California have seasons; it had rich, subtle, and utterly distinct ones.

And he wrote, finally, about his family. That he and his wife hadn't always understood each another, but he'd loved her unceasingly, and was humbled by her willingness to follow him into the upheaval of Air Force life and her ability to cushion that upheaval for their children. That he saw in each of his boys parts of himself, and often forgot they weren't merely copies until they did or said something he would never dream of, surprising and impressing him.

And he wrote about his daughter.

She said the Air Force wasn't for her. It felt as if she was rejecting, not just the Air Force, but me. But when she majored in Communications at UCLA, I imagined seeing my girl anchoring the local evening news, on her way to being the next Connie Chung. I could understand wanting that--that was a good career for a beautiful young woman.

When she took what she'd learned and wasted it, as it seemed to me, on law enforcement, I couldn't figure it out. If she wanted to keep the peace, why not *the Air Force, where I could have helped her advance and kept an eye on her?*

Now I see that's exactly why not. Nikki needed her own career, her own future, and her own path to it. She needed a trail I hadn't marked for her. My boys are brave and farsighted, but Nikki is braver than all three of them, in ways I can barely wrap my mind around.

Her hand shook as she slid the mouse and triggered the screen saver.

She'd always wanted her father to be proud of her. And he was--but she wanted him to be proud of her in more than just an I'm-proud-of-you-no-matter-what way. She knew he loved her. He loved all his kids. It would have been almost dishonorable not to love his children. But she wanted him to be proud of her the way she was proud of him.

Now she knew he had been. So why did her heart hurt so much?

Luke Eriksen had wanted his father to see him. "You know me," he'd written to unseen strangers in the pages he'd left behind. He valued that more than money. His father would have loved and understood someone just like himself; his own damage made it impossible for him to love anything else. But being just like his father was never a possibility for Luke. He would never have heard his father say, "I'm proud of you."

Nikki's father had typed out his pride. But he had never shared it with her.

Nobody was bulletproof.

You know how men are about feelings.

After a few minutes she wiped the tears off her face and woke up the display.

She longed to delete the file, but she wasn't five anymore, cutting the blooms off her aunt's flowers because she was mad at her aunt. She turned on the printer and checked the paper level. Her mother would love to read this. Easier for her to reread it if Nikki printed it for her.

Luke Eriksen, who couldn't grow up. God help her, she *did* know him. But she was damned if she was going to *be* him.

When you punch someone, your fist hurts. --Gene Wolfe

Survival

Ashton, VA, October 19, 2011

It starts, like so many things, with a chance encounter.

One Wednesday afternoon in Virginia, Angelique Gates holds an insistent elevator door for Dyson Cieslewicz. And she smiles.

*

They come forward quietly.

Ingrid Lessing finds him first, through a labyrinthine system of SEO keyword filters and online alerts her last summer intern set up to monitor campus crime. He's posted his brother's pathology on true crime boards, on forums where people crowdsource unsolved disappearances, on blogs dedicated to the too-weird-to-be-true. *Do you recognize this? Did this happen to you? Do you wake up, shaking, every night?*

Ingrid reads the posting twice, three times, fifteen that day. She puts fingers to keyboard the night after that, suddenly trembling: *He seemed so dedicated,* she writes, sends off into the void. *Solid. Competent. We had no chance.*

Later, once they've talked more; once they're writing each day, or every other: *Here. We can word this thing better.*

Ingrid's professional description finds Bethany Strange. *He said it was magic,* she writes from a college server in Memphis; white print on black background in a way that makes Dice's eyes ache. *I swam away. I ran. The FBI shot him to pieces.*

Morgan Ross shows up in January, online all hours of the night, hospital-bound and bored. Ingrid Fromberg and Peter Hsiung first log into the new website Ingrid's old intern designs in March. They type in abbreviations and snatches. They post, after a while, an endless stream of baby pictures.

*

"You see this?" Solomon Todd asks late one evening, having stepped into Stephen Reyes's sanctum long after the office cleaners have gone home. Reyes runs a finger down the proffered iPad screen, scrolling, scrolling: *She got hungry. He changed. That's when it started to happen. That's when she hurt me.*

There's a pattern here.

It's so amazing being able to talk about this with people who understand.

We should all meet.

"No," Reyes says deliberately, leaning back in his leather chair. "Can't say I do."

"Good," Todd says, and blanks the screen dark.

*

Sunday is not Dyson Cieslewicz's usual day at Idlewood. Chaz Villette blinks when he comes around the corner, already tired, already low, and there's Dice in the elevator.

He wedges an arm against the door to hold it open. He smiles.

"Everything okay?" is the first thing Chaz says. People keep routines like Catholics keep rosaries; when they break them there is usually something wrong.

"Yeah," Dice says, ducking away, standing back to make too much room in the elevator car. The doors finally close. The wheels and cables hum. "Just heading down to the cafeteria for something."

"I could use a bite too," Chaz admits. He always could, really. Dice blinks--strange, because they've done this before--and finally nods.

"Sure," he says. "Come on down."

They've rearranged the cafeteria: There's a circle of chairs at the back, spread loose around a table covered in better-than-usual fare: bowls of salad, thermoses of coffee. A stack of cups straggles loosely along one end. Casey Ramachandran is there holding a clipboard, but dressed in sweater and sleek blue jeans. People stand in clumps or pairs, chatting, awkward, hesitant.

And every face in the room is familiar.

He counts Memphis. He counts L.A. and Mississippi.

He sees Hafidha's mother and father, and his chest constricts.

"Who organized this?" he asks, turning to Dice, back to the wall like a rat in a trap.

Dice shrugs, hands open, spread wide to the sky. "We all did."

"Chaz," Hafidha's father says, heads turn, and Ingrid Fromberg sucks in a breath.

"Agent Villette," Ramachandran says, and puts down his clipboard. "Come on in."

"I probably shouldn't be here," Chaz says. It's plain to see what this is. This is for survivors; this is for the people who made it out. This is for the ones who didn't know what was coming for them, building like a hurricane, until it landed on their heads and blew apart their lives. "I don't belong here. I don't want to intrude."

There's something pressing on his chest, about the size of a nighttime devil. Something that makes his breath come fast and his face as blank as quarried stone.

"I'd say you belong here," Angelique Gates says, low and irrefutable, and steps forward to take his arm.

"It's all right," she says, and pats a red plastic chair. "Coffee's on. Stay a while."

He steps into the room, and sits.

“Down the Rabbit Hole” – by Sarah Monette

[editor’s note: while not an official episode, this is a longer story than most of the extras. It is told through Chaz’s LiveJournal posts. It is not, however, usual Chaz. It was written as part of “LJ Rabbit Hole Day,” when LiveJournal users encouraged each other to post “strange tales” on the publication date of Alice in Wonderland. As best I can track the “holiday” was created by user crisper; see their post on Jan. 2nd 2005 for more details.]

standuponit

WATER, ROCK, BOTH, OR NEITHER.

Water, rock, both, or neither.

January 27th, 2009

Naomi called at 12:01.

mood: quixotic

music: Katie Herzig - Hologram

Naomi called at 12:01. She started to apologize, but I told her not to. I know her. She wouldn't call me at home if she didn't have to. And anyway, I wasn't asleep.

"It's bad, Travis," was the next thing she said, and I realized that that

apology hadn't been as much an apology as it had been a way to buy time. She was rattled. And that meant it *was* bad.

"Tell me where," I said. I was already halfway out the door.

"The Sutter place," Naomi said, and there was no one around so I didn't have to hide my wince. The Sutter place hadn't had any Sutters in it since 1992.

"There in ten," I said and hung up. Too much irony in the sheriff killing himself because he's trying to drive and talk on his damn cellphone at the same time.

I realized as I backed the truck out that I felt this weird sense of relief. Another moment, my headlights cutting sharp wedges out of the night, and I figured out why.

I could finally quit waiting for something bad to happen at the Sutter place.

The Sutters had been all over the history of Camber and of Clayton County, but by 1992, there'd just been Paul Sutter and his wife left. Childless, good citizens, donated to local charities, close friends of the mayor, yadda yadda. The sort of people who, if they'd still been around, would've called me *Sheriff* Villette, with just enough emphasis--not to be impolite, never that, but just enough to show they didn't think I'd ever be able to fill Sheriff Leland's shoes.

But they weren't around anymore. Rosalie Sutter had died in 1990, laryngeal cancer and it'd been ugly, and after that, Paul Sutter had gotten a little . . . odd. I hadn't been here then, but I'd heard about it from Naomi and Ronnie and even from Sheriff Leland one night when he'd had maybe a little too much to drink. Paul Sutter had cut back his hours in his office first--not typical for a realtor, but he was past fifty and plenty wealthy for a widower with no children. But then he closed the office altogether, didn't try to sell it or anything. He let Darlene McCormick go with a severance package so generous that Darlene took a cruise through the Virgin Islands she was still talking about fifteen years later, which is even weirder if you know just how useless Darlene is in an office. He stopped going to football games, quit the bridge club he'd been playing in since before he got married. He stopped going to church. At first, Sheriff Leland told me, he'd talk to people who came to the house, although he wouldn't explain himself or even agree to the suggestion that there was anything wrong. But those

conversations got shorter and shorter, and then he'd stopped answering the door. "And what could I do?" Sheriff Leland had said blearily. "Ain't no crime to prefer your own company, and he'd show himself at the window if I hollered long enough. He swore he was fine, he'd got food laid in, and all he wanted was for the whole damn town to leave him alone. So I did what he wanted. I left him alone." It was mid-September 1992, a year and a half after Rosalie Sutter's death, when Ronnie remarked to the sheriff that it sure had beeen a long time since anyone had sighted Paul Sutter, and how much food could he have stored in his house anyway? They went to the house, got no answer no matter how much they knocked and hollered, finally broke the door down. They found Paul Sutter in the bedroom, lying in his bed as tidy as if Peabody and Hamms the undertakers had laid him out themselves. Doc Gordon's best guess was that he'd starved to death three months previously.

So that was the Sutter place. Nobody'd been able to shift it, so it just sat there year after year, getting more rundown and overgrown--more and more the sort of place where bad things happened. The locals said it was haunted, of course, but it wasn't that, even though I knew why they said it--why no one would buy it, even out-of-towners who'd never heard of Paul Sutter. It just felt wrong, the way some places just do. And those are the places where the dark gets in.

Naomi was waiting for me at the foot of the driveway. She looked as rattled as she'd sounded, and I thought of the things I'd seen Naomi handle without turning a hair and felt pretty rattled myself.

"It's bad, Travis," she said as I got out of the truck, just like she'd said on the phone.

"Take it from the top," I said. "For starters, what are you doing out here anyway?"

"Mrs. Mitchell," Naomi said. I rolled my eyes, and Naomi snorted in that way she has when she doesn't think she should laugh, and I think we were both glad of a scrap of normality. Mrs. Mitchell spent her life minding other people's business; a good thirty percent of the calls we got in a normal month were Mrs. Mitchell, panting to share the "suspicious" thing she'd just seen.

But Naomi sobered again. "This was a little different, though. She said her neighbor's girl--Lizzie Hewett--saw a light at the Sutter place coming home from a study date, and she was too scared to call

herself."

Lizzie Hewett was a sweet-faced high school junior, co-captain of the cross country team. I remembered that she herself preferred to go by Liz.

"So I said I'd swing by. And what with one thing and another, this was the fastest I could get out here. Wasn't no lights, but Lizzie wouldn't make something like that up. So I went up to check." Naomi stopped and hugged herself, as if it were cold.

"And?" I said, as easy as I could.

Naomi opened her mouth, then closed it again, shaking her head. "I thought I could just report it, but I can't. C'mon. Come see for yourself."

So I followed her and her Maglite up the driveway and around to the back of the house, where the sliding glass door was broken. By a tree branch, not by a human being, but it was a completely horrible non-surprise that somebody would see the opportunity and use it.

"That's how they got in," Naomi said.

"They?"

"In a minute, sheriff." Naomi only calls me "sheriff" when she thinks I deserve it--when I'm being stupid or an asshole. So I shut my mouth and followed her some more, careful of the glass.

The rooms were all empty except for the wall-to-wall carpeting that had been plush once-upon-a-time and now just looked ridiculous. And sinister, too, but I told myself not to be stupid--until we got upstairs to the master bedroom, and then I figured I could be as stupid and melodramatic as I wanted, because the blood was fucking *everywhere.*

The body was in the middle of the room, lying on its back; its arms were crooked up with the hands by the shoulders. There was a fan of blood across the beige carpet, like the poor bastard had staggered in a half-circle before he went down, and then a nauseatingly thick pool under the body's head and shoulders. And then from the fan of blood coming toward where we were standing in the doorway . . .

Footprints.

Human footprints.

Sneaker prints, in point of fact, and not big ones.

And even under all that blood, I could see the body was wearing a letter jacket.

"Oh fuck," I said, because it was Naomi and I didn't have to watch myself, and besides, she'd earned it. It's a mean trick, hanging somebody out to dry by playing it cool, and a lot of law enforcement in Clayton County, I'd learned, was about not being mean.

And Naomi nodded hard, almost like a muscle spasm or something, and said, "Can you tell who it is?"

We both knew all the kids at Clayton County High School by sight, but it was hard to match any of that up with this kid with his throat ripped out and blood as thick as paint on his face. I thought for a moment about going closer, but then I gave myself a good hard mental smack and got out my phone. "We'll find out soon enough," I said. I had Doc Gordon on autodial.

Me and Naomi and Ronnie are all the law there is in Clayton County, and we go to those continuing education conferences and learn what we can about crime scenes and forensics and what to do and what not to do, which pretty much boils down to "take pictures of everything ever" and "don't touch anything with your bare hands even so." Ronnie's good with the camera--and it helps, me and Naomi and Ronnie being all the law there is in Clayton County, for there to be something that's Ronnie's special purview, instead of me and Naomi doing it all faster and better and smarter--so I called him, too, and he took pictures and Doc Gordon took samples or specimens or whatever you call it, and Naomi and I measured the fuck out of those footprints. Either a girl or a younger boy, and whoever it was, they'd stopped and wiped their feet before they left the bedroom, which suggested a degree of cool-headedness that made both Naomi and me highly unhappy.

And then Doc Gordon sighed and straightened up and said, "Sheriff?"

"Whatcha got?"

Doc Gordon's mid-fifties, skinny and balding and kind of lawyerish to look at, but he was the guy took the bullet out of my leg the time Chip

Priddy got liquored up and shot the hell out of his ex-wife's Datsun, and I couldn't have asked for anybody better. He said, "It's Vernon Weatherbee."

And Naomi and I looked at each other and we didn't need to say it. Because along with the horror and the tragedy and the fucked-uppedness of it all, we now had Marion Weatherbee to deal with, and that was enough to strip anybody's gears.

So when we were done with the Sutter place and what was left of Vernon Weatherbee, Naomi went to notify Dale and Marion Weatherbee--I leave bad news to her as much as I can, because she's better at it, and she takes it out in trade by making me babysit the drunks at Homecoming--and I went the other, back to the department to drink coffee and and write this all out and wait for morning so I can go down to Clayton County High School and start asking questions.

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 07:16

Naomi came in at quarter of seven and went straight for the coffee.

mood: fictional

music: Richard Thompson - I'll Never Give Up

Naomi came in at quarter of seven and went straight for the coffee. I didn't need to ask if it'd been bad, but I had to give her an opening, so I said, "Doc Gordon was right?"

"Oh fuck yes, Doc Gordon was right," Naomi said immediately, like tapping a keg that was ready to blow. "Vernon never came home last night, and they just figured his girlfriend was lying to them about it."

"Nice," I said. "Girlfriend?"

"Yeah. Fuck." She put about half the sugar bowl in her coffee and

began grimly opening creamers, one after another. Naomi took her coffee black. "Peggy Marie Procnow."

"Oh jeez," I said helplessly, because Peggy Marie was one of the town Good Girls and seriously the last thing we needed to add to the mess on our plate. "You think she's our footprint girl?"

"No, I fucking well do not," Naomi said. "I cannot see Peggy Marie setting one foot on Sutter property, no matter *what* Vernon promised her."

"But the Weatherbees thought she'd lie to them," I said, as if I didn't know what kind of a horror Marion Weatherbee was and the things she'd accused adults of with less reason. My personal feeling was that Marion needed a therapist, if not some very heavy drugs, but it wasn't like anybody was asking for my advice.

Naomi turned around expressly to roll her eyes at me. "Don't be a dumbass, sheriff." And then her face changed. "You skinny piece of shit."

I grinned at her. "Count your creamers, Naomi."

She turned back, looked at the devastation, and cracked up.

"I'd give you hazard pay if I could," I said.

"And I have earned it," she said. "You know, I don't think I can drink this."

"I don't think you should try. Did the Weatherbees tell you anything helpful?"

She sighed, and her shoulders slumped. "Well, Dale knew about the door being broken. He was going to go fix it this weekend."

Every landlord in town had Dale Weatherbee as their maintenance man; he did it on the side of running the hardware store.

"So Vernon knew."

"Yeah. Dale says Vernon knew." She poured a fresh cup of coffee, put nothing in it, and came and sat down on the other side of the desk.

"So Vernon was cheating on Peggy Marie."

"That's kind of how I figure it," Naomi said. "But, you know, we don't *know* that. For that matter, we don't know he's *dating* Peggy Marie." She raised an eyebrow at me. The complicated social life of Naomi's teenage son had carried us through more than one drive across Clayton County, and I understood what she meant.

"Well," I said, "I guess I know where to start, then."

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 07:20 am

(no subject)

mood: hungry

music: Grover Washington, Jr. - Time Out Of Mind

Oh *god* I need a drink.

Or food. Food would do.

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 11:47 am

(no subject)

mood: predatory

music: Baltimora - Tarzan Boy

So my first interview was with Peggy Marie Procnow, and I did that horrible thing they always do on TV shows, where I didn't tell anybody why I was there, just to send me Peggy Marie when she got to school.

She was white around the eyes when she showed up (7:30, plenty of time before the first bell), like I was every monster she'd ever imagined being under her bed. Which was pretty much what I expected. All teenagers have a persecution complex, and about three-quarters of the time, they're right.

Peggy Marie always looks to me like she should be modeling for Aryan Youth posters: tall and blonde, with those orthodontically perfect white teeth and bright blue eyes. And she's one of those girls who just radiates, I don't know, *health* or something. I hope for her sake high school isn't her glory days, but I'll understand what happened if it is.

"Good morning, Peggy Marie," I said. "Sit down, please."

She sat, on the very edge of the chair, and stared at me like a rabbit.

"You're not in any trouble, honey. I just need to ask you about Vernon Weatherbee."

And I watched her face. She was as transparent as a window pane, and I knew right off that she hadn't had anything to do with Vernon Weatherbee's death. Which I hadn't thought she had, but I'd been wrong about stranger things.

"Did Mrs. Weatherbee make you come down here?" she said, and she was indignant, but also upset. "Because I *swear* I wasn't lying, Sheriff. I didn't see Vernon at all after school yesterday."

"But you're dating?"

She made a face. "Sometimes. Sort of? I mean, I like Vernon and all, but . . ."

"But?"

"Vernon says he doesn't want to be 'married.'" And her air-quotes were sarcastic and hurt, both mocking Vernon and full of the memory of being mocked. "So sometimes we're dating and sometimes we're not."

"Depending on what Vernon wants, huh?"

"Oh god." Her face crumpled for a second, the toddler Peggy Marie shining through the teenager, but then she pulled herself up. "But why are you asking about Vernon? Is something wrong? Did he get hurt?"

"I'm sorry," I said, and I glanced for a second at Linda Hogan, the principal's secretary, who'd ponied up to play witness that I wasn't sexually harassing Peggy Marie or something. "Vernon died last night."

Peggy Marie didn't take it in at first; then I saw all that healthy color start draining out of her face. "Dead? Was it . . . was it a car accident? I know he drives that Camaro way too fast."

"No, I'm sorry," I said, and I don't know if it says something about me or something about the job, but I was breaking the news of her boyfriend's death to a sixteen year old girl, and what I wanted most was to be able to write a note to myself about Vernon Weatherbee's Camaro. Because where the fuck was it?

"He didn't kill himself," Peggy Marie said; there were tears in her eyes, and her voice wobbled hard, but she was adamant. "Vernon Weatherbee did not kill himself."

"No, ma'am," I said, because she'd earned a *ma'am* from me. "He didn't."

As Peggy Marie started to cry for real, Linda Hogan got up and came around to her, and gave me a look that wanted to lay me out like roadkill. "That wasn't a nice thing to do, Sheriff."

"I know," I said. "But I needed to talk to her before she started crying."

Peggy Marie gulped hard and said, "You can talk to me now. I mean, what happened? Or is it like on TV where you can't tell anybody?"

"For now," I said, "I really can't tell you the details. I'm sorry." Because if Peggy Marie hadn't been our footprint girl, that girl was still out there, and my job would be about a thousand times easier if she didn't know we were looking for her.

She nodded and gulped again and said, "Mrs. Hogan, I'm sorry, but could you get me a kleenex?"

"Of course, honey," Mrs. Hogan said, with another death-glare at me.

Peggy Marie was still trying to hold it together; there was more iron in her than I'd expected. She sniffed hard and said, "Can I help somehow? I mean, do you need to know . . ." Her voice squeaked off into nothing; she took a deep breath and brought it down again. "Is there stuff you need to know?" And I guess my face showed just how dubious I was, because she said, "I mean it," and she sounded like she really did.

"Okay," I said. "If you didn't see Vernon after school yesterday, who would've?"

And god bless her, she told me. Mrs. Hogan came back and handed her a box of kleenex (and said acidly to me that the principal wanted to know when she could make the necessary announcement or did they need to get me a copy of the Freedom of Information Act first?), and Peggy Marie blew her nose and gave me the rundown of Vernon Weatherbee's friends. She got the hiccups halfway through, but she stayed the course.

So I spent the rest of the morning interviewing football players. People make jokes about growth hormones in the milk, but sweet merciful Jesus on stilts, I'm not sure it's a joke anymore.

I didn't find anyone who'd admit to seeing Vernon after football practice was over, around five-thirty, but Howard Pulaski gave me a good description of Vernon's car (and confirmed that, yes, he was driving it yesterday--trust a car nut), and Freddy Carmody, who was the only one of the bunch man enough not to care that I could see he was crying, told me the names of some of the girls Vernon "hung around with."

"I don't want to get anyone in trouble, Sheriff," he said, taking a kleenex from the box I pushed across the table at him.

"The only person who's in any kind of trouble is the person who killed Vernon," I said. "And we don't know who that person is. Don't have the first idea."

Freddy Carmody's smarter than you'd think to look at him; he's going to get to college on football, the way most African-American boys in Clayton County have to, and then I don't think he's ever going to look back. I don't blame him. He understood what I was telling him, that I wasn't on a witch hunt, and that being one of Vernon Weatherbee's

girlfriends didn't make anybody a murderer. So he said, "Vernon had a lot of friends who were girls, and he'd go to movies and stuff, but I don't think he was dating anyone but Peggy Marie." And he gave me three or four names, and then he stopped and rubbed his face and looked at me again. "And I saw him once or twice with Alma Finnister, but I don't know *what* that was all about."

"Alma Finnister?" I said, sorting through my head to find a face to put with the name.

"Yeah, you know," said Freddy Carmody. "Crazy home-schooled Alma Finnister."

"Right," I said. "I'd forgotten she was starting at CCHS this year."

"Oh yeah," said Freddy Carmody, and that was all I got out of him about Alma Finnister.

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 12:43 pm

(no subject)

mood: gloomy

music: Crooked Still - Undone In Sorrow

I had to fight with myself about it, but I sent Ronnie to look for Vernon Weatherbee's Camaro. Honestly, I wouldn't trust Ronnie to question a can of tuna, much less a teenager.

So I got to go back to the high school. Lucky me.

The morning was football players. The afternoon was a mix of cheerleaders and girls from Vernon's AP classes. Where the boys had all been closed off and trying not to show any emotion, the girls tended to start crying before they sat down. And Peggy Marie was the only one who I'm sure wasn't using it to keep from having to talk to me. The

rest of them, I can't tell.

But around the weeping, I got what I think is a pretty clear picture. Vernon was fun to hang out with. He was funny and he had a car and he had plenty of spending money (working afternoons and weekends in his dad's hardware store) which he didn't mind sharing. And Freddy Carmody was right. None of these girls had gone on dates with Vernon. They'd just hung out with him. Most of them thought he was kind of an asshole for the way he treated Peggy Marie, although nobody came out and said so, and I got the picture, a piece here and a piece there, that Vernon had been an asshole in other ways, that sometimes when he was funny, it was at other people's expense. Not that that's anything unusual for teenagers.

Nobody mentioned Alma Finnister, and she was the last person I talked to. Partly because she was the piece that didn't fit--the anomaly in the picture of Vernon Weatherbee I was building--and partly because, being the anomaly, she was my best candidate for those footprints, and I wanted her off balance.

Ganging up with myself against a teenage girl. I'm a real prince.

And boy, you could write a book on the ways Alma Finnister didn't fit. CCHS students aren't a real eclectic bunch. Oh, there's some kids who wear black and some kids who wear flannel, but mostly it's t-shirts and jeans, polo shirts and chinos, and the girls wear kicky skirts when they feel like it. Alma Finnister was wearing a dress. A calf-length floral print dress that looked like she'd borrowed it from her maiden aunt librarian if she had one. She was skinny, with bad posture and a bad complexion; her hair was mouse-brown, straight headed towards lank, and she had it pinned off her face with two barrettes like a girl about half her age. I don't know what color her eyes are, because she never once looked anywhere near my face.

And she lied.

She was a bad liar, and she was obviously scared out of her wits, but she had one thing going for her: she was stubborn as a mule. Her position was, she didn't know Vernon Weatherbee and she certainly hadn't seen him at all yesterday, and she stuck to it, even though she knew I knew it wasn't true.

And I didn't feel like getting out the rubber hoses and the bright lights, not least because Linda Hogan was still giving me the stink-eye. So

after we'd been around the thing like a damn maypole three or four times, I let her go and went to find out how Ronnie was doing. Because really, she told me everything I needed with that lie. She *did* know Vernon Weatherbee, and she *had* seen him yesterday, but to get more than that--and to get something that wasn't a proof by opposites--I need some leverage. Which would be that Camaro.

Which, of course, Ronnie hasn't found.

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 04:07 pm

(no subject)

mood: exhausted

music: Martin Carthy & The UK Group - The Mermaid

Well, it's all over now but the shouting.

And shouting we are going to have a lot of. A whole hell of a lot.

Naomi's on night shift this week--she and Ronnie trade off, because they still tell stories in Camber about Deputy Vincent Hollingsworth, back in the sixties, who was stuck on the night shift for six straight months and went completely batshit crazy. Deputy Hollingsworth came within about six inches of committing the only successful assassination of a public official in Clayton County history, and the first thing Naomi did, as soon as I was officially "Sheriff Villette," was move the filing cabinet so I could see the bullet holes.

"But the thing is," she said, and I've heard it other places, too, "he didn't try to shoot Sheriff Watson for being a sadistic son of a bitch, which he was. He tried to shoot him for being a hole in the world."

"A which in the what?" I said.

She gave me a helpless kind of shrug. "He was shouting it all over the place when they arrested him, and then at the trial, and then out at

Mattichitaw until he died in '85." Naomi's Aunt Loula is still a nurse out at Mattichitaw Mental Hospital, so I figured I knew what her sources were. "A hole in the world. Completely crazy." And she shoved the filing cabinet back into place.

So nobody in the Clayton County Sheriff's Department *ever* works nights for more than a month at a stretch. But sometimes I kind of wonder if Deputy Hollingsworth felt about Sheriff Watson the way I feel about the Sutter place. I've never met a person who made me feel that way, but that doesn't mean such a person couldn't exist. And I've heard other stories about Sheriff Watson--about whom the *nicest* thing anyone has ever said was that he was a member in good standing of the KKK--and he sure sounds like a walking talking version of the Sutter place, like nothing good could ever survive near him.

Don't mind me. I get a little crazy myself sometimes.

I waited until Naomi came on duty--did paperwork and all the other ordinary shit that piles up while you aren't watching--and then gave her the rundown of what I'd learned.

"You think it's the Finnister girl," she said.

"Yeah. She's the only one I know for a fact was lying. And she was the only one who was scared."

"Oh she was not."

"Okay, okay. But she was the only one who was *that* scared."

Naomi nodded reluctantly. "So what do you want to do?"

"Well, Ronnie didn't find the Camaro anywhere, and Ronnie's thorough."

"Is that what we're calling it today?" Naomi muttered, but she flapped a hand at me, about half apologetically, to go on.

"So we know it's nowhere near the Sutter place, and we know it's not anywhere obvious. Because face it, a bright red 2002 Camaro is going to be hard to miss in Camber."

"Okay," said Naomi. "I'm with you that far."

"So somebody hid it. Either Vernon or our footprint girl, and I'm thinking it wasn't Vernon or we'd've found it in the Sutters' driveway. So I want to cruise by Alma Finnister's house and take a look."

"Is this the we-need-a-warrant kind of look, sheriff?"

"Well, that's why you're coming with me, Naomi," I said. "So you can testify it isn't."

"And if you don't spot the Camaro?"

"Then we think of some damn thing else," I said. "Come on."

The Finnisters lived across town from the Sutter place, meaning about a five minute drive. Aside from the home schooling thing--which most people took as an insult to the Clayton County Schools--there was nothing particularly crazy about Gordon and Dolores Finnister. They were devout Christians of a somewhat fundamentalist stripe, and the worst you had to worry about from them was getting pinned down and harangued about "Christian education." I was pretty sure that neither of them had grown up in the kind of restricted environment they were inflicting on their daughters--Alma had two younger sisters, Lois and Carol--but that's not legally child abuse, no matter what I think about it.

I turned left on Bucknell, and Naomi shot me a look. "Finnisters live on Bolt."

"And their house backs on Chester. Along the ravine."

"Oh," said Naomi. There's a good stretch of Chester Road with no houses--ravine on one side and the ugly ass-end of the industrial park on the other. In the summers, kids go there to make out and smoke pot, but in January, it's not somplace anybody wants to be. It's where I'd hide a car if I had to, and for Alma Finnister, it had the advantage that she could walk home with nobody the wiser.

We were about two lots down from the Finnisters' backyard when Naomi said, "Holy shit."

I braked and pulled over. Another second and I saw what she'd seen--a glint of red down among the scrub trees. We got out and went to the head of the slope.

Bright red 2002 Camaro. Vernon Weatherbee's license plate and a

bumper sticker that said GO CLAYTON COUGARS!

I looked at Naomi. Naomi looked at me. We started down.

There was blood on the steering wheel, blood on the gearshift, blood on the driver's door, bloody smudges of fingerprints on the rearview mirror. And a stupid bobble-headed football player on the dashboard with Vernon Weatherbee's number painted on it in what looked like nail-polish.

"Jesus," Naomi said under her breath. "Jesus."

There wasn't much else to say. We hiked back to the car, took Chester to Ford, Ford to Bolt. Parked in front of the Finnisters' house. Nice enough house, no uglier than three-quarters of the houses in town. And the yard was immaculate. No children's toys, certainly no swing-set. Just winter-yellow grass and bushes waiting for spring, and a stupid concrete cherub in the flower bed by the door.

I rang the bell. Naomi stood back a little. Moral support and also just in case anybody did anything dumb.

Dolores Finnister opened the door.

"Mrs. Finnister," I said, hating every word. "I need to speak to Alma, please." And seeing Alma coming into the hall behind her mother, I added, "It's about a Camaro."

Alma Finnister went a horrible color, and her hands came up to her face. "I kept hoping it was a dream," she said, barely loud enough that any of us could hear her, and then she started to cry.

That was when the shouting started, and it's not done yet. I had to tell the Finnisters which lawyer to call--there's more than one that does criminal work in Clayton County, and more than one that does juvenile, but the only one I'd trust to hold a baby is Eli Chilcoate, and he has to drive in from Sparta. I just saw his car pull up, and in a minute, we'll go back to our so-called "conference room," and see if Alma Finnister can tell us what happened to Vernon Weatherbee last night.

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 08:34 pm

(no subject)

mood: nauseated

music: KT Tunstall - Heal Over

When Sheriff Leland died, his widow came to clear all his junk out of the office. I'd always liked Ruth Leland, in that way you like somebody you don't see often and never get to talk to much. She was an outsider like me--Sheriff Leland had met her at Texas A&M, and then they had one of those weird twenty-year-reunion courtships that led to her moving to Camber and marrying him. They had about ten years before the heart attack got him, which in some ways of looking at it is a lot of time, and in other ways, no time at all. She left Camber as soon after the funeral as she could, so the day she came to box up his personal stuff was the last time I saw her.

She didn't say much--she never did--but when she'd packed up the photos and the diplomas and certificates, she came over to the desk and touched the little statuette of Justice, with her blindfold and her scales, that Sheriff Leland had kept next to the phone. Mrs. Leland said, "Will you keep this?"

It was a funny way of putting it, not *Would you like this?* or even *I think he'd like you to have this,* just a simple, factual, yes or no question. And it's what I always think of when I remember Mrs. Leland.

I said yes, and Blind Justice is still right where Sheriff Leland put her. I'm looking at her now, and I'm thinking she's lucky to have that blindfold on. And I'm talking about her because it's saving me from talking about Alma Finnister, which is a pretty cheap and obvious ploy there, Travis. Cowboy up and get it down.

You know, I would've felt better if she'd been angry. Or if she'd been stubborn, the way she was this afternoon. But she wasn't. Alma Finnister was *grateful*. Because we were the adults. We could make it okay again.

Eli wasn't happy about it, but he couldn't keep her from talking.

Couldn't keep her from confessing, and although I knew her parents weren't the Catholic type of Christian nut, there was something religious about the way Alma Finnister insisted on telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. She kept her hands folded in her lap and her eyes fixed on the wall just above the door, like every picture I've ever seen of Joan of Arc.

In a funny way, the hardest part for her to admit was the part that wasn't about Vernon Weatherbee with his throat ripped out: why was she in the Sutter house with him in the first place? She went an ugly red that made her acne stand out in magenta and fucsia, but she said, "He was my boyfriend."

"Everybody we've talked to says he was Peggy Marie Procnow's boyfriend," I said.

"He was my *secret* boyfriend," she said, and any other teenage girl would have rolled her eyes. "Mama and Daddy would have a fit if they knew I was even *talking* to a boy."

"And Peggy Marie?"

"Vernon said he couldn't hurt her by breaking up with her. He said when he graduated, he'd just let it die off. But he promised he'd write to me. Every week."

"Uh-huh," I said, and I guess I let too much of how I was really feeling into my voice, because she flared up like the Fourth of July.

"He did! He promised!"

"And that's why you were in the Sutter house," I said.

"Sheriff," Eli said.

But Alma was already talking. "We had to. There wasn't anywhere we could meet where somebody wouldn't see. And Vernon said it was okay because his father was going to fix the door on Saturday, so we were only sort of borrowing it. And we weren't going to damage anything. We just wanted to be *alone*."

"Vernon talked you into it," I translated.

That knocked a big dent in Joan of Arc, but she looked down at the

table and nodded.

"Okay, honey," I said, because really, a little breaking and entering was the least of anybody's problems here. "Just tell us what happened."

"Well, we got in," she said. "Vernon had a flashlight and we looked around a little. It was really creepy, but it was kind of neat, too. So we sat in what we thought was the bedroom and we talked for a little. And then, um, Vernon kissed me. And I kissed him back." She lifted her chin, like Joan of Arc waiting for somebody to light the fire.

I thought some very nasty things about "Christian education," but I kept my voice gentle when I said, "Then what happened?"

I guess part of me had been hoping, even then, that she'd say, "then a one-armed man jumped through the window" or "then Vernon pulled out his Leatherman and started sawing." But she frowned, unhappy and puzzled and sick, and said, "I don't know. I just got so *hungry*."

"Alma," Eli said, and he was visibly alarmed, which is something you never want in a lawyer.

"I don't know!" Alma said. "I really don't. I was just so hungry," and she sounded dazed by it, even now. "So hungry and so angry, and then there was blood, there was blood everywhere, and Vernon was in the middle of it and he wasn't moving." Her voice rose and rose, and then she was crying, like Peggy Marie had been crying that morning.

I went out into the hallway; after a couple minutes, Eli came out to fetch Alma a Dixie cup of water.

"Insanity?" I said.

"What else can it be?" Eli said and went back in.

And that's the question, isn't it? The question I'm sitting here asking Lady Justice. Naomi came back from getting the Camaro photograhed and dragged out of the ravine, and she said, "You know, laryngeal cancer is a hell of a way to go."

"Hunger," I said.

"And, well, you know the stories, don't you?"

"Which stories?"

"About Darlene McCormick's 'severance package,'" Naomi said, with the most eloquent air-quotes I've ever seen.

It took a moment for the pieces to click together, and I felt my eyes go wide. "You mean . . ."

"Oh yeah," Naomi said. "And the way I heard it, Mrs. Sutter *knew*."

"That can't have made her very happy," I said and winced when my voice squeaked.

"Mrs. Sutter wasn't a very forgiving woman at the best of times."

"Hungry and angry," I said, echoing Alma Finnister.

"Not that Alma Finnister didn't have good reason to be angry at Vernon Weatherbee, but apparently she wasn't."

"No," I said. "She wasn't."

"But maybe," Naomi said softly, "Mrs. Sutter was."

I had a chill go straight up my spine like a cramp. "Naomi, you realize what we're talking about here is crazy."

"Crazier than a girl tearing her boyfriend's throat out with her teeth? Crazier than a man starving himself to death with a full pantry?" She shook her head. "I gotta go tour the county roads, Travis. You go home and get some sleep."

But I'm still sitting here thinking about Paul Sutter and Vincent Hollingsworth and holes in the world. And what do you do about justice when every version of the truth is crazier than the last? How do you make it okay? How do you do your job, Sheriff Villette?

Naomi was right. I need to go home. But I don't think I'm going to get much sleep.

Tags: down the rabbit hole

Posted at 11:59 pm

4.02 "Five Autopsies" - by Leah Bobet

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Baltimore, MD, November 26, 2011

Madeline Frost, M.D. November 26, 2011, 9:13 p.m. Postmortem dissection of decedent Audrey Michelle Gillespie. Race: White. Age: 27. Sex: Male. Date of death: November 24, 2011.

There was steel, and light.

The steel was in her hand, and where it cut, it demarcated: a line between correct and incorrect, evidence and conjecture; a line fanned out around two chilly breasts. The air was cool and sharp with bleach. The scalpel moved. Stiff skin split.

Madeline Frost peeled back the chest flap and said, "Fractures visible on ribs eight and nine."

Another pathologist might have paused with the scalpel; lined it up against the cracks to catch the angle of the blow. Frost tracked it with her eye and saw one blow, long and sharp: a crowbar, or a straight tree branch.

Different from the face, she noted. The face had been beaten. Hard.

The scalpel moved twice, and she lifted the fractured rib cage clear.

The breast implants got in the way. Frost bent back the chest flap impatiently, secured it with a pair of medical clamps. They bobbled between the layers of skin like a pair of fatty tumors. Her breath hissed. Inconvenient. Not the most inconvenient thing people did to bodies, but nonetheless.

She had a pan for the organs. They came out tough and tenuous, lightly damaged: there was no fatal rupture, no leak of fluids. Frost again glanced at the decedent's face: the layers of bruising that had become shattered cheekbones, a buckled skull, teeth knocked free and glistening in the depths of the opened mouth. One eye was bloodied. The expression was the expression

of every corpse: faint, blank surprise.

She weighed the organs rhythmically. Her scale was digital, and did not creak. Sliced from them deft samples, from the arteries, from the veins. Opened up the stomach, and found half-digested beans, pine nuts, brown rice, a smear of green avocado. Two pills, which she fished out with a sharp pair of tweezers and separated into glass. "Time of death," she said into the hanging recorder, "was no more than two hours after the final meal." They had found this one in an alley. There was likely a restaurant receipt among the personal effects. She would fix it definitively when the pills were identified, and their rate of dissolution.

She wiped the scalpel. Paused. Came back, again, to that face.

The lines were wrong. There were consistencies to punched-in faces--and it was most definitely a pair of fists; blow after blow, bruise after bruise, measured the same fingers'-width across--and this face did not have them. There were no concentrations of bruising on the sides, as the decedent tried to turn away. No defensive wounds on the arms, no ligature marks or round-gripped bruises. Just jagged breaks, flowering outward--

Ah.

She looked again at that line of breakage on the rib cage. The cracks spidered out at the bottom of each rib. She turned the whole structure, ran a hand along the eighth rib like a British matron checking, white-gloved, for dust: found them much rougher, jagged-edged.

The ribs had been cracked from the inside.

Frost frowned slightly and reached for her electric saw.

The brain was damaged: nearly pulped against the skull. She lifted it out with delicate fingers, charting the crushed pathways. Where they leaned against the skull, bone splintered just slightly. Outwards.

Autopsy was all about ruling out: what remained, no matter how improbable, as Conan Doyle and her first-year medical-school instructors had said, must be the truth.

Madeline Frost reached for her needle and thread, and thought how she might explain this to the FBI.

*

After the first trifecta of bodies Stephen Reyes and Solomon Todd delivered to Frost's autopsy suite, they had given her a cell phone. "Use this one," Reyes had said, "and we'll know it's you."

"Like the Batphone," Todd had added, and fell quiet when she just stared.

Madeline Frost hit the speed dial with finger-skipping precision; ten tones echoed uniform in her ears. The phone rang twice--once to fish it out of his pocket, or from a clip on his belt, and once for the hesitation--and then the line shocked to life.

"Reyes," he said, curt. As if she didn't know who she was dialing.

"Agent Reyes, this is Madeline Frost," she said, as if he didn't possess call display.

"Dr. Frost?" he said; needless repetition, but common enough to brush aside. "I have the rest of the team here. I'm going to put you on speakerphone."

"Very well," she said, and waited for the depth of the sounds in her ear to change.

"Go ahead," he said after a moment, hollower, lighter. She cleared her throat briskly.

"I will not have the toxicology reports for another two days," she said, and tallied, briefly, the vials and vials and jars with her eyes. "But your decedent likely died of blunt force trauma."

"Mm," he said, far away. Something rustled at the other end of the connection: a paper, perhaps. A crumpled coffee cup.

"The injuries, however," she said, "appear to have been inflicted from the inside."

"You mean internal trauma?" A light, gruff voice. Daniel Brady. A credible officer of the law, but not--and never--a doctor.

"No, Agent Brady," she said, crisp and clear, to ensure she was not misunderstood. "The trajectory of the blows is such that it indicates they were inflicted from the inside of the body outward."

There was a brief silence.

"The eighth and ninth rib are cracked with impact occurring on the inside of the ribcage," she added. "And the skull, while likely settled in transit, was impacted outward at a thirty-degree angle. The brain damage sustained is the most probable cause of death. The other injuries are comparatively minimal."

"And...nothing came out?" Brady said, slower than usual. "No holes, or...exit wounds?"

She could not have said what he was picturing, but it was certain he was picturing something. "There was no evidence of any foreign bodies, no. Just

impact trauma, centered on the face."

This rustle of paper was perhaps more predictable. They would have photos in their files, just as she received an evaluation of each crime scene with the bodies. She rarely looked at them. They only biased the data.

"Maybe," another voice said--she sorted through mental recordings of gesture, pitch, syllable stress and decided *Nicolette Lau*--"the UNSUB was trying to prevent an ID of the body."

Lau was likely not talking to her; the tone was too quiet, too musing. "The dentition," Frost reminded, "is largely intact. And if one wished to prevent identification one would certainly remove the fingerprints."

The depth of the silence on the end of the line spread. Hopefully they would recruit another agent with medical training soon. They'd asked fewer foolish questions when Agent Worth was alive.

"There are Egyptian myths about that." Agent Villette's voice came, tinny, across the cellular connection. "That if you destroy a person's image, you destroy their afterlife."

"So that's mythology," Agent Brady said. "Or this is really, really personal."

Frost glanced at her dissection table. The drains were dark, lightly slicked under the bright, industrial lights.

"Those are my preliminary findings," she said. "I have to clean my table now."

Reyes's voice jumped in smooth after a moment. "Yes. Thank you, Dr. Frost. We'll be in touch."

"Yes," she said, and disconnected.

She would write up a more complete preliminary later that night, when the table was scrubbed and her instruments sterilized. The maintenance staff was not of the caliber of FBI special agents. They had repeatedly proved reluctant to clean an autopsy suite at 11:35 on a Saturday evening. After the third series of phone calls and forwardings and disagreements, Dr. Evans had provided her with three large bottles: detergent, sodium hypochlorite, 2% aqueous glutaraldehyde. The bleach went, dilute, to bathe the instruments. The glutaraldehyde went on the table.

Madeline leaned with both arms onto a fat yellow sponge. It scrubbed away the blood, germs, and dirt. Like a rush of soft dopamine working through a vein, order leaked slowly back into the world.

It was ten to midnight. There was an abnormal temporal lobe tumor waiting in

the cooler, sent from a hospital in Tallahassee.

Surely, surely there was time for another.

*

It was not a very interesting tumor.

Madeline wrote Tallahassee about the tumor from her office: a cramped booth that opened direct into the autopsy suite. Most pathologists attached to Johns Hopkins had offices upstairs, in a wood-paneled and sunlit administrative wing, but she did not see patients. She did not entertain coroners, did not aspire to sit on the hospital executive staff. She kept an old brown desk and a set of Ikea lamps in the office, and her filing cabinets. The cabinets were light beige. She emptied them to storage every three years.

When she finished it was late: two-thirty in the morning, and the hall lights dim. Frost walked through them at habitual, efficient angles. Her flat shoes gripped the linoleum-tiled floors. The Pathology Building sounded distinct by night. The administration powered down diagnostic machines, autoclaves, lighting to conserve power, and from under them, the hum of the freezers emerged.

There was a young man at the security desk by the north door--*Male*, she catalogued, *late twenties, Hispanic, brown eyes, black hair, approximately six feet two inches, two hundred and ten pounds*. He wore a nametag: Ricky. The security officers rotated daily. It prevented familiarity.

"Would you like a walk out to your car, ma'am?" he asked. His eyes strayed to her badge, assuring himself she belonged here. Back up to her face. She did not have the kind of body young men's eyes lingered upon.

Madeline's assigned parking space was across the street from the Pathology Building. During daytime hours, she could take an indoor walkway right to the garage. In the evening it was locked. Crime was up in Baltimore since the economic crash. Most hospital entrances now shut down at six.

"Yes, thank you," she said, and Ricky's face muscles took an odd turn, and he stood and tucked his radio into his belt.

Ricky left her at her car door--a small grey Volkswagen, inoffensive and fuel-efficient--and she drove the thirteen minutes into Guilford, to the parking spot always left clear in front of her townhouse doorway. The porch light was on; an automatic timer. She locked the car door, unlocked the front door. Turned the porch light off with a flick of an inside switch.

From the inside, she thought as she shed her cushioned work shoes and placed them neatly on the shoe rack. *Hm.*

A flyer for sports equipment curled, solitary, on the floor underneath the mail slot. Madeline stooped to pick it up and carried it into the kitchen, to the stack of scrap paper on the rarely-set kitchen table. Put the already-full kettle on the spotless stove and turned the burner on.

Plucked the crime scene evaluation out from her black medical bag and flipped open the crisp brown folder.

It was a curiously empty crime scene: no blood spatter, no violence, no haste. A small stain darkened the brick of the building that bordered the alley, and that was all. Not much, she thought, to indicate a homicide if not for the extensive facial damage. Not much without knowing that the decedent was halfway transitioned, male to female, and that there had been a similar death three weeks prior.

She leaned back against the counter. Audrey Gillespie worked as a software developer. Two cats, divorced parents, one sibling, no human dependents. Neither lived nor worked in the neighborhood where the murder occurred. Crewed on refurbished tall ships as a hobby, and had sailed to seven countries.

Irrelevant, she thought with a sigh.

The kettle whistled. Madeline took it off the stove top, and reached into her cupboard for the bag of Sleepytime she would usually have had at the ready, if not for that crisp folder, the angle of those ribs, the rough catch of them on her glove as she caressed the naked rib cage.

From the inside, she thought again, and frowned.

Cause of death: Brain damage due to blunt force trauma.

Manner of death: TBA.

Act II

Madeline Frost, M.D. November 27, 2011, 11:32 a.m. Supplementary report to postmortem dissection of decedent Audrey Michelle Gillespie. Race: White. Age: 27. Sex: Male. Date of death: November 24, 2011.

It was bothersome.

She slept badly. Madeline did not, as a habit, remember her dreams, but she dreamed, and woke thick-eyed and uncomposed to her 7:30 alarm. She stirred an extra sugar into her morning coffee and sipped it at the kitchen counter, eggs in the frying pan and preliminary report atop the bread box. The calculations were good. There was nothing wrong with her math, her photos, her inferences.

The drive into Johns Hopkins was fifteen and a half minutes on Sunday mornings. Madeline flashed her pass to a new security guard--black female, thirty-five to forty years of age, fit, short brown hair, and conveniently labeled Jeanine--and followed the empty hallways to her lab. The morning light shut off like a faucet. There were no windows in the forensic pathology wing.

It took two hours and seventeen minutes to recalibrate all of her instruments. She did not begrudge it; keeping one's tools sharp was best practice in any case, and considering how often Greenwich Mean Time slipped, or the weight of the standard kilogram was revised these days, it was wise to ensure that one's most basic foundational assumptions hadn't shifted slightly leftward in the night. Foundations, after all, crumbled. The leaks that started their crumbling were born years and years beforehand.

She snapped on a fresh pair of nitrile gloves at the end--timed perfectly, timed exactly for the diener's arrival--and opened the cooler. Watched him lift the body with a light grunt and place it on the table.

There was nothing wrong with her calculations, and nothing wrong with her measurements. The angles of the wounds echoed the same degrees; the force cracked bone to the same depths. Her calipers clanged on the stainless steel tray. All her notes were correct. No details had been missed.

Madeline Frost closed up the body bag. Stripped off the nitrile gloves. Dialed the extension for the toxicology lab, and put a rush on the tests.

At two-thirty, an orderly tapped on the door. "Dr. Frost?" He glanced down at the charts, the photographs, the reference books spread all over her pristine autopsy suite counters. "You forgot the release form for Audrey Gillespie's remains. Can I get a signature?"

There were cases of severe internal trauma where no mark was left on the outside of the body: sports injuries. Blast damage. *Car accidents*, she thought, and shook the thought away. Bodies were often deceptive. Bodies outright lied. DiMaio had a case study--

"Dr. Frost?"

She looked up. "I didn't forget."

The orderly's forehead crinkled. Surprise caused certain involuntary movements in the face and forehead. One observed them frequently on decedents. "I'm sorry if I misplaced the form--"

"Hold the body, please."

"Doctor?

"I'm not finished with it yet," she said, and turned back to DiMaio.

Toxicology took two days in total. She had twenty-four hours.

There was little to do but wait.

*

It was a slow day in the laboratory, or she had frightened someone or impressed them. The toxicology results arrived a full nine hours early.

They materialized under her laboratory door in the eight short minutes it took to fix a coffee in the staff lounge on Monday morning. She returned to the sound of fading footsteps, a slight catch in the door's swing, and then the folder beneath it, damp with fading sweat. She juggled the coffee cup to her right hand and plucked the folder off the floor, spread it wide on her office desk: prostate antigen test negative, blood work a complicated cocktail of chemicals (marked up by the lab physician as consistent with hormone therapy in scrawled red felt-tip pen), no substances on the clothes or hair or skin that could not be found in an urban alleyway. The pills in the stomach were estrogen and Tylenol. No rape, no drugs, no evidence.

Madeline Frost put down her coffee, decapitated a sugar packet, and scowled.

*

Frost's acting supervisor was the assistant head of Johns Hopkins Pathology: Dr. Tenzin Dawa, male, forty-five years old, black hair, black eyes, Ph.D./M.D. University of Pennsylvania. He was regarded as popular, meticulous, and a highly ranked researcher in the subfield of gastrointestinal pathology. He largely left her alone. She largely returned the favor.

Dr. Dawa had one of the wood-paneled offices, six floors up, equipped with a long hallway and reception area, thick carpeting (entirely unsuitable for bodily fluids), and three administrative assistants. The one seated at the reception desk was tall, broad-shouldered, graying in a desultory sort of way. Frost straightened the dress jacket she kept in her office for occasions when she needed to go above stairs--the lining felt too slick on her forearms, and clinging cold--and said, "Dr. Madeline Frost to see Dr. Dawa."

To her credit, the administrative assistant did not ask if she had an appointment. She merely nodded smoothly. "Dr. Frost. I'll see if Dr. Dawa's free."

"Thank you," Frost said, and glanced around the reception. It was too formal and lush to have a magazine rack; this was not a level at which a doctor needed to exercise their power by leaving the patient waiting. The decorations were understated: photos of Johns Hopkins pathologists celebrating awards, milestones, and discoveries among a forest of conference centre podiums. The chairs in Dr. Dawa's reception were sturdy and thickly upholstered, brown

against the green of the walls. She sat.

Dawa's receptionist was efficient: she returned after no more than seventy-four seconds, heeled shoes muffled by that carpet. "He'll be out in just a moment," she said, and he was; practically behind her, striding down the short hallway in his executive's suit, face pinched and expressionless.

"Dr. Frost," he said. "What seems to be the matter?"

Dr. Dawa was exceptionally polite. *What did you do now?* Frost translated.

It was not an unreasonable question. She had not come up to the pathology offices in over eight months. Generally, when she came up to the pathology offices, rather than remaining within the boundaries of her working environment, something was indeed the matter.

Frost held out the brown folder she'd stuffed the entire case into. "I'd like a second opinion on this."

Dr. Dawa's eyebrow rose. To his credit, the involuntary indicators of surprise cleared off his face almost quicker than they arose. "We should do this inside," he said, and motioned for her to follow.

She passed thick oak doors contrasted with door-length windows showing the head pathologist's office, empty and dark; a room lined floor to ceiling with installed file drawers; a kitchen nook, countered, with a microwave and commercial fridge. The door to Dawa's office was open, and she saw the edge of a grey-suited man--*white, fifty or above, six-foot, no--drat*--before he steered her into an empty small conference room by the simple expedient of blocking the hallway with his own lean frame.

He shut the door softly behind them, and pulled out a leather-backed chair to sit. She took the cue, and sat in her own. Put the folder down on the polished oak table and slid it across, within mutual reach.

"Anything in particular?" he asked.

"I'd rather not bias your opinion," Frost replied, and withdrew her hand.

"All right," Dawa said, slower than usual, and opened the brown file.

Frost controlled the urge to lean forward as Dawa's eyes skimmed the paper, the pictures; as he flipped through the charts and tests and police reports. The view outside was impressive, even on a cloudy fall day such as this: leaf-shed trees, and lawns, and the wandering paths of the medical campus, and then straight across the unfolding buildings and byways of Baltimore. She turned away from the window. Sat straight and firm, and watched the twitches of his fingers instead.

"I won't ask if you're sure," he said finally, looking up at her with a small, dry smile.

She inclined her head. "Thank you. I verified every measurement."

"And this is one of your FBI cases?" he asked. Her consultancy was a sideline, but it was a prestigious one for the department. Or so she was informed. She was not asked to meet with any donors, or give any lectures, and her photograph was not on the wall amid the podiums and plush. Thankfully.

"It is," she said. "The confidentiality requirements are rigorous. But if you're familiar with any case studies with similar findings, I would prefer to give a complete report."

Dawa nodded thoughtfully. His eyes strayed back down to the paper. "I'm going to ask Eunice to make me a personal copy of this."

Frost waited. The inquiring note, the allusion to permission, was social courtesy. He was not a boss who ruled through giving orders, but he was nonetheless her boss.

"If I find anything," he said, and shut the file carefully, and stood, "I'll get back to you."

"Thank you," she said, and meant it, and stood as well. Class dismissed.

Eunice, the receptionist--*black female, five feet three inches tall, age approximately forty-five to fifty years*, she filled in belatedly--vanished momentarily into the file room, and then handed her the original file, neatened and in order. "Thank you," she said again, and navigated through the sunshiny halls to the elevator. The jacket pulled across her shoulders. The hospital staff she passed slid their eyes past her, chattered over her head. The metal doors of the elevator opened before her and then closed behind her.

She pressed the second basement button. The jacket lining stuck to her elbow like dead skin. She reached up and peeled it, curling, away; felt the recycled air on her forearms, and reveled in the regained ability to breathe.

*

The phone was ringing when she opened the autopsy suite door.

Two rings, high and sharp: the FBI phone. Frost stalked across the room, shoes squeaking softly on tile--no one, at least, objected to a pathologist wearing sensible shoes--and reached her desk on the fifth ring. The cell phone had come with preprogrammed numbers. The call display spat up *Reyes.*

She had rarely been in a position where she was unsure what to say to Stephen

Reyes. It was an uncomfortable proposition.

The sixth ring echoed off the tiled walls of her office, and she pushed the talk button hard.

"This is Dr. Frost," she said, and the line was buffeted by a blow, or a breath, or the wind.

"Frost?" Reyes said--and did not bother to identify himself, oddly enough--"Do you have a moment?"

"Yes," she said, mildly unnerved. Simple questions did not make her jump. The echoes of her own office did not make her jump. "I have the toxicology results from your decedent. There was nothing out of normal parameters, and no fiber or DNA evidence, and neither I nor my acting supervisor can explain the results."

"Your supervisor?"

"Yes," she replied, and awaited the barrage of questions.

But Stephen Reyes seemed to wave off the mystery as if it were an errant breeze. "Any sexual assault?" he asked tersely.

"None. There are some additional tests I might run--"

He cut her off before she could even draw breath to enumerate them. "That's fine. We have another body."

Eagerness flooded her mouth. "Send it," she answered.

Cause of death: Brain damage due to blunt force trauma.

Manner of death: Undetermined.

Act III

Madeline Frost, M.D. November 27, 2011, 2:42 p.m. Postmortem dissection of decedent Simone Stephanie Carter. Race: White. Age: 35. Sex: Male. Date of death: November 27, 2011.

The second body arrived early that afternoon, by air. It was escorted to Frost's autopsy room by a pair of uniformed federal marshals, jacketed in black nylon over crisp-pleated pants. *One Hispanic male, thirty years of age; one black female, approximately forty-two years of age*--she began, and then the staff attendant placed the body on the table, and there were more important things to do.

Frost had already scrubbed her hands clean. She tugged two nitrile gloves

from a box of one hundred and pulled them snug; unzipped the body bag.

The decedent was fresh. Rigor mortis was just setting in, stiffening up muscles and limbs. She pulled the bag wide, opened its jaws to expose the face. It was bloodstained, nose-broken, wrecked. Just now darkening with bruises.

One of the federal marshals coughed. Frost looked up, impatient. He extended a brown folder in one tentative hand. The chain of custody form for the body, and the FBI's file. The useless file.

"On the counter," she said sharply, and inked her precise signature in the three denoted blanks. Turned, crisply, back to the body. White, and older. Dried blood splashed about the blouse, the loose skirt; the two-inch-heel shoes were muddy with it. No indication as to whether the involuntary mechanisms of surprise had taken hold on--she glanced at the tag--Simone Stephanie Carter. The decedent's face was destroyed.

She snapped three brisk digital photographs. Unbuttoned the blouse, neck to tails; then cuffs. This decedent's bra was stuffed with shaped prosthetics, soft breast forms like the ones made for cancer survivors. She strode to the counter and flipped open the file, avoiding everything but the medical history. There was no mention of cancer, but there was a plastic surgeon, and a listed therapist, endocrinologist, and GP.

Male-to-female transition, she read. Not as far along, then. Or hoping, through hormone therapy, to grow natural breasts.

At least I won't need the clamps, she thought, and took the next set of pictures.

The marshals stood at attention while she filled the pan she would use to wash the body clean with warm water, secured a clean cloth, laid out sample bags and vials, and turned on her digital recorder. She prepped until there was no more prep work to do, and then looked up at them with an impatient eye. The male twitched slightly. The female rubbed both hands down the uncreased hem of her jacket, and said, "We'll leave you to it, then."

"Thank you," Frost said--*Get out*--and turned on the recorder.

She noted the clothing, layer by layer: color, state, position. Moved her magnifier over every inch, its light blasting too-white onto bloodless skin, delicate tweezers held loose in her left hand. There was a fiber, here and there. She gathered every one.

There was something pasty on the eyelids: thick and clear and shining under the bright light of her lamp. Abrasions on the face, but too far away to have seeped there. She lifted one eyelid, then the other.

A pair of bloodied holes stared back at her.

No, she corrected, when she had adjusted her light, tamped down all the unprofessional, involuntary responses. The eyeballs were in there, just deflated; fluids had clumped the lashes together and dried in the corners of each socket. No wonder the lids had stayed so decorously closed, bouncing along in the body bag. Cautiously, so cautious, she scraped flecks of dried something off the eyelids, and into an evidence bag.

Went searching, hair by hair, for more.

She caught the second glint on the left-hand fingertips: dried, shiny fluid coating them like melted gloves. It had run down the fingers to the first joint. Ended there.

She scraped lightly under a fingernail; held the tip of her pick to the light. Blood, crusted dry. In half-moons along both hands, dug deep under the nails.

Aha, she thought, and grabbed for an evidence bag.

*

The tests did not take a day and a half this time. They came back after barely four hours. And not with an orderly, or slid under the door; with a technician, tall and ponytailed, still in her lab coat.

"That was quick," Frost said, and fought the urge to reach out for the wadded, pressed printouts. The technician guarded the packet of papers close, blithely unaware of the social cues inherent. Frost settled her hand on her counter, to keep the fingers from drumming.

"Dr. Dawa's fast-tracked your lab requests," the technician said, glancing around the autopsy suite. It was spotless: table clean and every jar, bag, and fluid in its proper place, no posters or pictures on the walls. The undisguised curiosity in her eyes shuttered, then went dark. "I've got tox, multiple blood test IDs, and fiber samples. The impact stuff will have to wait until tomorrow; Rashid's out with a cold."

Frost tipped her a sharp nod and took the packet of papers. Four hours. They must have pulled half their laboratory off of everything. The grain of those papers was so very thin.

Dawa's professional interest could be useful. If she didn't spend all the time she'd gain not waiting fending off administrative inquiries, deflecting scrutiny. Waiting for staff half her age from other departments to escort themselves off her doorstep.

The technician's gaze had fixed itself: on her desk, with its tidy in-and-out tray, its single lamp, its wall-mounted shelf of anatomy books. "Oh hey, you do origami?" she said.

"Pardon?" Frost asked.

The technician pointed. *Ah*. She'd seen the caribou, folded crisp, head high and scenting some papery invisible wind, perched on the base of Frost's desk lamp. The skin was brown, textured. Tissue-thin.

"Yes, that's mine," Frost said, and skimmed the first page. Similar hormones in play, but at lower levels. No intoxicants. No convenient way to say her decedent had slipped on the floor and cracked her face into pieces, or gouged out her eyes on a convenient loose tile.

Drat, she thought first, but easy answers were for simple people. So, then: Good.

"There's this great origami mobile in the kids' ward," the technician rattled on. "Oncology. With all these colors and a little green frog, and a raccoon that opens its mouth when you pull the tail--"

"Mm-hmm," Frost said, and flipped the printed page to read the second.

"--someone donated it and it's just a work of art, the kids *love* it," she said.

"It's not that hard," Frost said. Reread the page. Hoped the tech might stop talking.

"How do you learn to *do* that?" the technician breathed.

Madeline remembered distinct soft hands, large on hers. Long, concealing hair. The tip of an adult nose. Fold, and crease, and then gently, tug just so--

"My mother taught me," she said, and put the packet down. Hospital paper was blank, anonymous, efficient. It made impermanent figures at best: designed to be filed, tucked away, recycled. "The impact studies will be forwarded?"

The technician leaned back, just a little. "Yes, right away," she said, professional again, and crisp. Frost was not her boss, but one could still issue a dismissal.

Frost looked away when the shadow had faded down the hall; when the hum of her lights took over as the high note ringing in her ears.

One body could be an oddity. Two was much, much more.

She stood and went to her computer.

Agent Reyes, she typed in, above the digital document copies that were somehow slower in arriving than young lab technicians eager to snoop, *here is your preliminary data. Please telephone as soon as possible.*

Bodies had *rules*, even the ones that came by way of Stephen Reyes. And she was going to find out how these two had broken them.

*

They called within the hour.

"Dr. Frost," Reyes said, backed by a soft chorus of shifts and shuffles, echoes too close -- indoors, then, and not alone. "We're all here if you'd like to brief us."

She did not want to brief them. She wanted to speak to him about tile floors, and circumstances, and crime scenes. She wanted *information*. "Very well," she said. One for one was a solid rate of exchange. It would present better than just asking.

"Your decedent," she started, "shows factors consistent with the previous subject: elevated hormonal levels consistent with gender reassignment, a cracked skull, and insufficient evidence of impact trauma. Although this one," she added, "had enough damage to the skull that it was unclear where the blow trajectory began. The fall to the floor destroyed it."

"But the blows should have come from the inside?" Daniel Brady pressed.

"There was one fracture," Frost said. "Left arm. And no evidence of impact with an object on that arm that was at all consistent with the angle of fracture."

No evidence of an impact with an object at all, actually. Just splintered bone and torn muscle, and no physical explanations.

Someone's breath whuffed out. "So. Definitely one of ours," Brady said.

Frost shifted in her chair. It turned noiselessly; it was old, but well-maintained. "Another thing," she added. "There were traces on the fingernails. Blood," she said, "and vitreous humor. Both belonging to the decedent."

"She tried to dig it out," Villette said, faint.

The thing in her head, yes, Frost filled in, and felt the disappointment resurface. There was a reason the pathologist's job was to merely report the facts, and not to pursue theories, causes, motives. They made you want things. They slanted your ability to observe and synthesize evidence.

Define, she asked herself, *in anatomical terms, "the thing in her head."*

"That's correct, Agent Villette," she said instead.

There was little else to tell them: old bleach on the skin, from the tiled floor of the washroom where the body had been located. The contents of one last

meal. Scratches on the face. Eyelashes. Skin.

From their reaction, or lack of it: no new evidence.

"Well," Reyes said, taking the ends of the conversation smoothly in hand. "Thank you for your time."

"Agent Reyes," she said, and cleared her throat lightly. "Might I speak with you privately?"

Her cooler hummed. Someone's shoes squeaked down the hall, past her door, and away to parts unknown. A throat cleared on the other end of the line. "I don't see why not," Reyes said, and the echo of the telephone connection drew smaller, closer, as he switched off speakerphone.

"Is everything all right?" Reyes asked, and he did not appear to mean it as *what did you do now?*

"Agent Reyes," she said, and shifted the sheet of paper so the corners lined up right. "Tell me more about this case."

There was a short silence. "You don't usually ask that," he said.

That was true. She glanced over her shoulder, at the square door of the cooler where the body of Simone Carter lay. "Bodies have rules," she said--repeated, though he did not know it. "Even the ones you bring me."

"I'd be curious too," he said blandly. An attempt to lighten the mood. She ignored him.

"And remember I'm not a profiler, Agent Reyes," she said. "Please explain the terms as you go."

The breath he let out may have been annoyed or amused. It did not bear analyzing. "All right," he said, and cleared his throat. "We have a few things to go on. This UNSUB stays in a fairly small pool of victims: white, late twenties to early thirties, transitioning from male to female. The fact that he can find them means he's at least partially a member of their community, someone they're familiar and comfortable with--a restaurant waiter, a neighbor, a friend--and the narrowness of his victim pool tells us that he's thinking of someone in particular when he kills: someone he knows, or himself, who he wants to kill again and again."

The cadence of his voice had changed. There were fewer edges to it. Professorial, she decided; he had been a teacher. "Go on."

"You've told us there's no sexual component. No damage to the genitals."

"There's not," she confirmed. Remembered those false, rounded, inconvenient breasts.

"Then there's a strong chance this isn't purely a hate crime. There are stories about men who kill male-to-female transitioners because they find out they're not originally women, and either can't handle their own attraction or strike out from shock or betrayal. But there's no anger focused on those parts of the body; it's focused on the face. So this is probably more complicated than that."

"Probably?" she asked, and shifted the phone to her other ear.

"Probably," Reyes said. "Profiling's an inexact science. We draw from what's probable. Guidelines."

"You rule out the evidence that's not there," she said, suddenly comfortable, suddenly sure. Not so far away from autopsy after all.

"That's right," he said, a little surprised. "And the sexual element's not there. The crime scenes are also wrong for the kind of sustained privacy a hate crime suspect tends to want: They like dark fields and tall trees," he said dryly.

There was a space left for her to laugh in. She did not opt to take it, but she marked it as an offering, just as dry.

"The alley was plausible," Reyes continued. Unlike the younger agents, he did not wobble, did not ever lose stride. "The library washroom, and a neighborhood Laundromat with street-facing windows? They aren't: too high a chance of interruption, too many people around to identify them, and not enough time with the victim. These pattern more like blitz attacks: a lot of stalking and planning, and then a sudden, short amount of violence."

"Unexplained violence," she said. Violent force springing up quick, and quiet, and without DNA or fiber remains. The hole in her facts that was that violence.

"Anomalous violence," Reyes said, and she thought perhaps he was agreeing. "And the more we know about how he kills, the more we can figure out why, in his head, he kills."

And then catch him and put him in Idlewood, Frost finished. Or provide a specimen for her to examine. She scrunched up her nose. Either way, there could be more data at the end of the line. Data that would make sense, if she could help them find their suspect.

"He's also accelerating his timetable," Reyes continued. The emotional response he gets from each kill is wearing off quicker every time. He's going to get sloppier. And more violent."

And more people are going to die, she filled in. And those deaths, bodies sent to her autopsy suite to lie there as mysteries, as *undetermined*, would be useless.

"And what can I do to assist?" Frost asked.

To Stephen Reyes's credit, he did not smile indulgently at her; that pull of the lips would have been audible, or the seconds-thin slowing of the pace of the words that told you that no, you could not possibly handle this, and you were not needed here. *Go back to bed*, her memory whispered, and she shook it irritably off. "I'm not sure," he said, serious; thoughtful and thinking. "Right now what we're doing is trying to establish why these victims. Something else has to connect them: whether it's a place they've all been, or someone they all know. Geographic profiling and victimology. We've only come up with one thing, and"--he paused--"it's too intangible to pursue well."

"What's that?" she asked. Put the pen down.

"All three posted an It Gets Better video in the past six weeks."

Madeline's hand paused on the pen. "Pardon?"

"It Gets Better," he said, and maybe now a touch of that indulgence was there, but never mind it, never mind. "Video messages from gay adults to teenagers who are being bullied in high schools. It was on the news a few months back."

"I don't watch the news, Agent Reyes," she said. "Too many unpleasant stories."

Reyes made a noise that was something like a harrumph, and yet curiously unflappable. "I'll send you the specific links," he said. "Right now it's our main connection between the victims."

"That they were public as transgendered persons?" Frost said.

Reyes paused; the tone of his voice went low, surprised. "Perhaps," he said. "Or maybe just that they were happy."

*

"Hi," the speaker-flattened voice said, drawl-inflected, uncertain. "My name's Simone. When I was born I was Simon."

A slender arm reached out. Adjusted the camera. It slowly refocused, close: an anonymous blur of skin, and then eyes, nose, mouth.

"When I was in grade three I was getting picked on--I was getting picked on already in kindergarten. But this one day some kid called me a homo, a fag, a queer, and I just couldn't handle it anymore. I walked right out of the classroom, down the hall, no idea where I was going. I have no idea where the teacher was. There was this big window, and I stopped and looked out over the schoolyard and the street, not knowing where to go, what to do. And...they'd followed me out. They were right behind me. And this skinny

guy, this wiseass nasty little kid, said, 'Hey, gonna jump? Why don't you jump?'"

A crimp of the mouth. The tiny digital lines of lips, tinted with reddish-brown lip gloss, pulling into fences.

Madeline Frost sat cross-legged at her kitchen table with her hand around a mug of cold tea, and watched.

(Hey there queer kids, Audrey Gillespie's reconstructed face, throat, lips said. *My name's Audrey. Here you go, thinking, "Just some asswipe on the Internet telling me my problems not real problems," right? But I been there. My life from eight to eighteen was nothing, and I mean nothing, but sharks. I don't know how they knew. I didn't know. I just--I got that I was different. But I didn't* know.)

"They say that suicide's contagious: that it's some kind of thought virus that you can spread around like AIDS. Well, I didn't stop thinking about it. I didn't stop hearing that little voice that asked me if I was gonna jump for years and years, every time something got bad. Every time I didn't know what to do there it was, whispering in my ear."

(Then, y'know--shift of the chair, of the chin; hair pushed out of the face--*I got older, and I start growing all this* hair *on my arms and chest. And it doesn't feel like something to be proud of, becoming a man.* A pause. *It feels like filth. It felt like a tumor.)*

Audrey Gillespie's bedroom was small, white-walled, darkened: the hump of a futon mattress off to one side, and the edge of a particleboard prefab desk clearly visible where her hand gripped and gripped the edge, turning the knuckles pale. Simone Carter sat on a couch, overstuffed green velvet. It was wreathed in pillows and fringe. The seat on one of the cushions was frayed. Secondhand, Frost noted. Well-loved.

"Here are the things you'll have to do to go into gender reassignment therapy. You have to go to a therapist for three months before you can get a referral for hormone therapy. Then they can refer you to a doctor. *Then* you need to get a lawyer, to help change all your ID and documents."

(I didn't want anyone to see my body. I wore long sleeves all summer for years. I think some of my teachers thought my parents were hitting me, and y'know? Crooked smile. *That would've been easier to explain.)*

"I spent two years going for electrolysis, so someone could burn the hair off my face and arms, one at a time, for an hour a week." A rueful grimace. "I lost forty pounds right up front, 'cause when you start taking the hormones it messes with your metabolism. I took voice lessons so I didn't talk so much like a man."

(Y'see, I'm not supposed to be a dude. Inside, I'm Audrey. And when I figured that out? It got better. I don't know how. I don't know if they could smell the knowing on me, or if I just walked different or what. I guess--sheepish smile--*I don't know much. But I do know this.)*

"And you know what?" A lean in, filling up the lens. "It was all worth it. And you know what?"

(*It gets better*, Audrey said, and reached out a hand to blank the webcam dark.)

"It gets better," Simone Carter said, and smiled a wide, shy smile Frost would not have been able to detect from the dental evidence. "I promise."

The video ended. Madeline Frost rubbed her arms, warding off an errant chill. Something crinkled in her palm. She looked down: she'd folded the sports equipment flyer from the top of the paper stack, unconscious, automatic, into a crease-edged paper crane.

(--soft, large hands; fingernails chipped. Hands showing her where to put her own on the paper, and a voice twice as soft. A voice that was never raised in all the time she could remember except for once, hoarse and feeble, outside a nighttime window.)

She closed her eyes. Put the garish-colored crane down, and laid her hands flat on the table. She was not going to go into this. She had decided, long ago, that there was no useful information to be had there, and she had signed the bodies away.

(--floral perfume. Light hair around her fingertips. Soft, bewildered, frightened voices calling and calling her name.)

A branch scratched at the kitchen window. She jumped. It sounded like thin fingers.

"It is nine thirty-five," she told herself quietly. "You are fifty-one years old, and you are in your house in Guilford, Maryland, in the United States of America."

Your mother is dead, she added silently, savagely. *Your father is deader. You were only nine years old.*

The screen of the laptop stared back at her. *Play again?* it queried, silently, flashing images of a dozen, a hundred earnest faces across the black space where those two dead ones had lived.

"No," she told it, and shut the browser down. The wind blew. The branches scratched again. She made a note to have the tree pruned, and to seal the windows against the cold that surely must be coming through the gaps

between their panes. Observable facts. And evidentiary likelihoods. Those were the things one could work with.

You should have done something, the little voice whispered, like a clean, sharp cut.

Madeline Frost tugged at the crane's beak, sharp as a peck. The delicate paper wings bowed, and then dissolved.

Cause of death: Cardiac arrest due to circulatory shock.

Manner of death: Undetermined.

Act IV

Madeline Frost, M.D. November 29, 2011, 11:03 a.m. Postmortem dissection of decedent Vincent James Beach. Race: White. Age: 22. Sex: Male. Date of death: November 29, 2011.

The telephone woke her.

Madeline had been dreaming. She blinked her eyes, focused on the molded white ceiling of the house that had been hers for years; peeled away the overlay of another house she'd lived in, another time, another bedroom not much larger than this one. The phone trilled; not her landline, she realized, as her hand found the alarm clock, her handset, mashed buttons on both to no avail. It was the FBI cell phone.

She fumbled at her sparse brown wood nightstand and thumbed it on.

"Hello?" she said, surprised at how thick and old her voice was after all.

"Dr. Frost?" Agent Villette's voice came, higher, out of the phone. "I'm sorry, did I--"

She opted not to let him finish. "Yes," she said, limbs still locked and stiff, heart still racing. *Adrenaline*, she noted, detached. The body's response to perceived threat, even if no threat was actually present. Her mouth tasted tangy and sour.

It was an old dream. It no longer surprised her, and neither did the fear.

"It doesn't matter," she said, half to herself, into the phone. "What is it?"

"Well, ah--" he said, all poise gone. He was a kind man. She waited for him to recover it, fingers plucking at the bedsheets, grasping for the edges of her own. "We have another body. And Agent Reyes said I was"--another pause--"to brief you."

"That's correct," she said, and rubbed her eyes. "Please wait a moment. I need to get a pen."

Madeline Frost did not leave a pen and paper beside her bed. The notions she had during sleep were foolish ones, dead issues and old data, and anything sufficiently productive would not need to be written down. She swung both legs onto the small rug and padded into the hallway, checking, old as lifelong habit, that each door was as open as she'd left it; each room still dark and empty. The counter in the bathroom sparkled in the morning sun. The handles of her office desk drawers were positioned just so. She took a fresh yellow legal pad from one of them, selected a ballpoint pen. "Thank you, Agent Villette. Please proceed."

"We have another victim," he said, clipped; matching, tone to tone, her dredged-up professionalism. "Fitting the same profile as the last ones: white, young, and transgendered. She was called in two hours ago, from a city bus shelter, by one of the other commuters. The glass is shattered." He paused. "Nobody saw anything."

Impact damage, she thought, mind wakening. Savored the disjunct feeling of being briefed on a murder, instead of briefing another. "Send me photographs of the broken glass as well, please. And there were fluids?"

Villette's tone stayed unwaveringly neutral. Implausibly so. "There were."

"Samples from the scene as well. And the eyes? Is that consistent to the last decedent?"

He cleared his throat. "There, ah, isn't enough left of the face to tell."

She felt the odd urge to console him; Charles Villette, pale and wounded, wired in a hospital bed with his father's knife wounds on his back. "That's all right," she said. "I'll make do."

The space on the telephone was awkward; even tired, she could tell. Frost cleared her throat. "Is there anything else pertinent?"

"We're checking to see if she made an It Gets Better video. There are people down at the community center here who'll know. And we'll be looking into which doctors approved the surgery."

"Oh?" she said. That had not been a part of Reyes's investigation.

"Yeah," Villette said. "Something Agent Reyes thought of yesterday."

"Very well, then," she said, the indefinable sense of someone else's theory tickling at the inside of her skull. "I'll contact your team when the autopsy is complete."

"Yes," Villette said, awkward again. "Thanks," and hung up.

The sun came in the window, dappled with the shadows of oak leaves. The branches pressed up against the panes like fingers. She really had to do something about that tree.

Madeline showered and dressed slowly. The house was chill, and night tension made her limbs ache. Her sweater was utilitarian, and her pressed pants; she would change into scrubs at the hospital in any case, and likely wear them throughout the day. She did not taste her breakfast.

She disarmed the alarm system to unlock the door, and armed it again before leaving. The leaves were drifting onto her small porch. She dusted them away with one foot and locked both locks tight.

The car was slightly warmer. She tucked herself into the driver's seat, handbag stashed securely in the passenger's. Shut the door, reached down.

Her hand wavered on the seat-belt buckle--

(--a reach; a soft click; a yank of the wheel and then tuck the chin, surprised shouting drowning out the radio, curl up tight and brace One-Mississippi Two-Mississippi Three, brace for impact--)

--and clicked it shut. Joined the strap together. Put the keys in the ignition, and started her car.

*

The body was waiting when she arrived at the hospital, still just as discomfited. The late November sun streamed through the doorway and petered out along the hall. Two marshals were waiting in her doorway with an envelope, the appropriate forms. She took them and felt the stiffness of a cardboard folder. Directed the marshals to the cafeteria. There was nowhere in her hallway to sit.

Frost brought the files inside and left them on the counter. Opened up the cooler, and stepped inside.

It was impossible to miss the new cadaver. The drape of the body bag was wrong: two legs, two arms, and a dented, misshapen ruin. Frost circled it carefully; took hold of the gurney handles, and began to push. The dented thing flapped slightly with the motion. She watched it move over the smooth tile floor. Pondered asking for assistance in transferring the body to the table; in the end, just lined the gurney up gently, braked it at the edge of the table, and pulled.

The bag slid smoothly off the gurney and onto her bright-lit table.

The setup was mechanical: recorder, and tools, and buckets and bags. She went into her office and closed the door, and changed into the fresh pair of scrubs and goggles kept there.

It was waiting for her when she stepped back out. She donned new gloves, one after the other, and unzipped the bag.

The right side of the jaw was torn nearly off its hinge. *Acceleration. Escalation,* Frost thought--profiler word, motive word -- and charted teeth automatically, marking which were stable, which were broken, which were knocked out of the jaw. The front incisors were bowed forward like broken white masts. Their roots shoved against the gumline. Bent from the inside, out.

Trajectories of force, spilling, shoving out of eyes and nose and mouth.

There is an order to this, she told herself, mildly shocked that she'd even thought to violate it. The teeth should, at the moment, be nonexistent. The teeth were secondary until she had taken her initial photographs; catalogued the clothing and trace evidence and examined every inch of skin.

She reached for her camera, and her hand hovered over the file, the prejudicing, irrelevant, useless file.

She opened it.

There were multiple angles to the pictures: back, side, above, below, all blurred with the distortion of thick industrial glass. Orange markers scattered like raindrops across the sidewalk, marking drops of blood, blue-edged shards of glass, crumpled dropped tissues. The break in the glass indeed qualified as *shattered;* chips crumpled and fell from a bull's-eye target broken clean through, and the remains were smeared with blood and skull fragments.

The body slumped through that broken pane, head lolling forward and still half-seated on the shelter bench, like a sack of drowned cats.

No witnesses, she reminded herself, and spread the lips of the body bag wide to give the camera enough light.

"This is the postmortem dissection of decedent Vincent James Beach," she said into the softly blinking recorder as the images on her digital camera stuttered and set--she had turned off the false shutter sound five minutes after its first use. "White male, twenty-two years of age, date of death November 29, 2011. Presiding pathologist is Madeline Frost, M.D."

She took six close-up angles of the ruined head, the mouth. They shivered silently in frame and blinked into bright-lit reality.

"Clothing," she said into the recorder, with a little cough. "One button-down

shirt, purple, three-quarter sleeve; undisturbed. One pair black pants, zipper and buttons intact. One pair black socks. One necklace, blue glass charm hung from a black cord--"

The icicle teeth splayed out from behind red lipstick. She reached one-handed for her tweezers, and plucked carefully at a hair, matted in blood, on the black nylon cord of the necklace.

The upper right canine gave, and tinkled to the floor.

*

Afterward, she went to her computer and navigated to YouTube, her fingers wrinkled and cold from the grip of the gloves and the anti-heat of the body. There were whole channels of them, labeled and sorted and weighed by geography, by age and identity. It didn't take her long to find the video.

"Hi there," the face said, barely recognized, unrecognizable. "I'm Vin. I'm just turning twenty-two now, and"--hesitation--"this is my last day of looking like a man."

The high forehead tilted up. The face was angular and smiling; smiling like a getaway.

"Yeah, I know that this is gonna take years. I've been waiting ever since I was four years old for this, and I just got off probation at my new job today, and y'know what that means? It means I've got a salary for the first time ever. I don't have to keep waiting anymore."

"So here's my to-do list." One long hand held it up: black-marker block letters, neatly printed for the camera: electrologist, therapy appointment, insurance company calls, pretty new dress. "Here's all the things I'm going to do this weekend. And I'm kinda hoping you'll stick with me and watch while I do it, because just like our buddy Dan says, it gets better. And I'm going to prove it to you."

The list fluttered down. The eyelids fluttered, a slow blink.

"I'm not going to be trapped in here anymore," that smiling mouth said. "I'm planning the Great Escape. I'm getting out of here, and I'm going to be a butterfly. And I'm going to show you every step of the way."

She had no results. There was no reason to make a formal phone call. She was not a profiler, and whatever her experience with the anomalous, she dealt in facts and actualities, and not metaphor, theory, the workings of other people's thoughts. It was not a qualified suggestion to make.

She typed the address of the video into her FBI cell phone, and sent it, text-message, to Stephen Reyes.

The answer came three hours later: *TY. Important. Will call. Stand by.*

*

Shouting was usual. In the house, there was always shouting. Silence of this quality was not.

(It is January 20, 1969; there is no saying what time of night, because this is when Madeline learned to pay attention to time, its numbers dripping like fluid from an IV bag, like spit in the mouth, like blood. It is also the afternoon of November 29, 2011; an office door shut and locked firmly behind her, an hour of bleary desk-chair nap, and Madeline Frost has had this nightmare before.)

She sat up in bed. The silence had woke her, and not the shouting; the smell of something cold and unexpected, outside the parameters of her world. She sat very still and very quiet in bed, seeking with her eardrums. Listening for clues.

Shh, she told her heartbeat, just like Mama told her when she sent her upstairs on the bad nights, but it chattered noisily on.

There was a sound downstairs, finally; a click. A catch, and three heavy footsteps.

Madeline slid her feet out from under the blankets and set them on the floor. Her weight eased onto them, a little at a time. She crept to the bedroom door, and opened it, and peered outside.

Her parents' door was open. No lights were on in the bedroom, not in the bathroom, not in the hall. The hall light downstairs shone like a yellowed moon, and so she tiptoed to the banister, looked down through its rungs. Tried, hesitantly, a couple stairs.

Her father was in the living room, pulling down the blinds. Dust puffed out from their accordion slats; they had not been moved in a while, left wide open for the sparse light of winter to come in and touch the floors. He fumbled and tugged with his big fingers noiselessly, lips pressed together, face spotted on the cheeks with furious red. No swears, no complaints, no calling for Mama to *clean this damn house, or fix this stupid shit,* or even to bring him a rag for it. Utterly, absolutely silent.

The banister creaked. He turned around.

There were only two mirrors in the Frost household: one in Madeline's little bathroom, and one in her father's. She was close to neither. There was no way of telling what involuntary things her face spoke; how she succeeded, or failed, at schooling it to silence.

And silence was important. Silence was everything.

He regarded her, tight-wound, deliberate. She stared back, not sure where to go, not wanting to ask, *Where's Mama?* or *What's going on?*

"I had a bad dream," she said, lamely. She was a terrible liar. It was a terrible lie.

He looked at her a moment longer, and then wiped his hands on his jeans.

"Maddy," he said, rough as a splintered rib cage. "Go back to bed."

She watched his heaving, sweat-soaked shirt; his red face; the ruffle of cold air in his perfectly kept hair. The air was sharp with frostbite.

There was a vein pulsing in his fist, jumpy. Hungry.

It was thirty-one minutes past eleven. She went back to bed.

*

--and woke with a start, neck cramped and arm bloodless and tingling, in the blackness of her hospital office.

She fumbled at her desk for a light; pulled the cord of the lamp, and its green-tinged brilliance hurt her eyes. She squinted against it and rubbed her eyes. Twenty minutes past five.

Stephen Reyes's last text message sat there, fat and waiting. There was one missed call. Just seconds ago; the phone must have woke her. She hadn't recognized the noise. She rubbed her eyes, hit the redial button immediately, brought it up past short, mussed hair to her ear.

Stephen Reyes's phone rang, and he picked up immediately. His voice was thick and crackly, broken by bad signal and acres of noise. "Reyes," he said, sharp and automatic.

"Agent Reyes," she said, "It's Dr. Frost. I was indisposed for a moment--"

"That's all right," he said, and seemed to draw in a breath, backpedal. "We have a suspect. It was a good lead. We're performing the operation now."

Performing the operation, she thought, and it was a scalpel-thought: black-vested, fit, sharp people reaching into a small house in a small city in a small corner of the world and excising the cancer with a twist of the edge.

"His name is Leslie James," Reyes continued. "He's forty-one, white, works as a QA analyst for a computer company. And was turned down for gender reassignment multiple times by multiple doctors."

Profiler details, she thought. Unimportant things, while their suspect was still

living and breathing.

"What sort of"--she paused--"operation are you referring to?" she asked.

Reyes breathed out, and there was something funny and grim in his tone on the heels of it. "He's barricaded himself in his apartment. Lau is trying to talk him out."

And there was a soft voice mixed in with all that crackle: a firm and kindly *Leslie, we can solve this problem here*-- and soft shuffling, too much to be wind. It was Reyes's earpiece, interfering with the cellular signal held so close; blending and bleeding together.

A reply to it, high, thin, strained: *The* problem *is I'm trapped. The problem is I can't get* out.

The Great Escape, she realized, and shifted the phone in her hand. Not the probable rings and rings of police officers surrounding this unnamed building in an unknown city block. That body. That life. Her parents' house.

"And then he'll go to Idlewild," she said to Reyes still waiting on the other end of the line; Reyes who might cut off her channel to those soft voices if she did not provide him more questions.

"That's the goal," he said, distracted; just as distracted as she by the conversation whispering in the background. "We don't have the staff capacity for reassignment surgery, but Ramachandran can probably bring in a consultant."

All you wanted, right? Lau's voice ghosted across the line. *To get out of your body.*

Tired of being stuck. The reply came dark, hardened. *Tired of hearing how I'd make a fucking terrible woman. They told me it was just a body, just a step. They said I could come out of it like a butterfly, they always say WAIT AND WAIT--*

Idlewood; Frost considered it. Closed doors. Four thick walls. A house in the country, loveless, far away, where you could live under the microscope and never blend in. Never escape the scrutiny of the different or damaged.

What can I do to assist? she'd asked, and now there was an answer. Her throat went dry, and that still place, that quiet place in her head emerged, gently, guiding her through the next words like a steering hand. "That's a cruel bargain, Agent Reyes," she said.

"Yes," he replied.

The files lay stacked beneath her hand, the top folder slightly creased where

she'd laid her head to sleep. She smoothed it; the crease would not come out.

Leslie, Agent Lau's garbled voice said.

And then the phone moved away from that breath, or the breath from the phone. There was a moment of silence, then a flurry of noise: steps and shouting and then the explosions lit her ear up, blotted out everything, turned it to static.

Five shots. Then a sixth, an afterthought, aftershot, ringing over the phone line loud and out of tune. Footsteps echoed, stampeding, on the other end of the line. There were shouts; a crack, blurred and dim as a skull breaking. The wind blew over the receiver.

She clutched the phone tighter. Stared at the wall.

And then--

"Frost?" Reyes said. He was panting.

"Is everyone safe?" she blurted. The adrenaline taste fluttered through her mouth. She stood straight and tall, irreproachable, unmoving. Hand tight around the phone.

"He charged the police line. He's dead. I'm sorry," Reyes said, after a moment. The buzz of noise, of activity, had slackened. The quiet crept back in.

"I--" she started, and wet her dry lips. "I expect to see the subject as soon as is practicable."

*

They found Charlotte Jane Frost (age thirty-five, white female, blond hair, brown eyes) in the snowbank the next morning, after her husband reported her missing; after the county officer noted the house slipper sticking out in the back field, well back from the county road; after, at dawn, Gerard Frost unlocked the door.

Autopsies were cruder things then. The county coroner--a coroner, not a pathologist--measured the blood alcohol level and the creep up arms and ankles of the blackened, staining frostbite, and declared the manner of death to be misadventure. Everyone in the county knew Charlotte Frost drank. Nobody said anything at the small, untidy funeral.

Madeline, nine years old, dressed in scratchy black, went home with her father.

The first six months were subdued. Her father folded in, kept low, said little; fixed her lunches and dinners with an elaborate flair that might have meant reward, or deniability, or the purchasing of silence. There was no guessing;

her mother had tried to guess, tried to calibrate, tried to *please*, and it had done her no good.

Madeline Frost did not have the word for what she was either. But she knew that she was different, and patient. And she knew from the autopsy, the shape of her teachers' mouths, the silence in her household what would and would not work.

She stayed quiet. She gathered data. She moved through the house like a ghost, and watched, and waited for the Great Escape.

Cause of death: Brain damage due to blunt force trauma.

Manner of death: Undetermined.

Act V

Madeline Frost, M.D. November 30, 2011, 11:03 a.m. Postmortem dissection of decedent Leslie Mark James. Race: White. Age: 41. Sex: Male. Date of death: November 30, 2011.

The final body did not come with an escort. It came with Agent Daniel Brady.

"Dr. Frost," he said, with an incline of his big blond head, as the orderly behind him shuffled the necessary paperwork. He looked fatigued. There were thick, dark circles under his blue eyes.

"You will be observing?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, and reclined, lean and heavy, against the farthest wall she had. She pulled out a pair of nitrile gloves, ran a practiced eye over her tools. Queued up the recorder hung above the empty, metallic table.

They wheeled the body in for her at ten o'clock: white, late thirties to early forties, with a stocky build. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Unrelentingly male.

There was steel in her hand, final and clean. She cut.

*

"Do you want to know the story?" Brady asked. She cut. The scissors flashed, still bright, in the densely packed machinery of her decedent's chest cavity.

She might have ignored it, on another assignment. She might have turned her face away, or told Agent Brady, crisp and clear, that he was welcome to watch only if he did not interrupt the proceedings. Frost spread the skin of her decedent's chest wide, unwrinkled, smooth, and made another sharp, short cut, and nodded.

"Reyes told you he was turned down for gender reassignment," he began.

She nodded again. Worked her fingers between the arteries. Cut.

"We wasted two days looking at it as a hate crime. And once we put the profile together and thought, no, this is about someone else having what you want, we tracked him down through his medical history. He was turned down three times. The doctors felt he was too heavy to pass convincingly as a woman. Or too old. Or too something. He went to every reassignment doctor in the state."

Brady's voice was cold and acid. Frost lifted the heart out of Leslie Mark James's chest and set it in the metal pan atop her digital scale. "Heart," she said for her recorder, "three hundred and two grams." It was an average size for a heart: no greater and no smaller than the regular run of parameters. She set it aside, and located the gall bladder. A little heavy. She reached for a new tray.

"That's where the videos fit in," Brady said. "The first crack was the denial. The second was seeing everyone else get what he wanted, and seeing how happy it made them, and knowing he was never going to have it."

I'm going to be a butterfly, she remembered, one wild moment of uncontrolled conjecture. And voices buzzing around her own head, lying down in the back of an ambulance: *Heart rate's high; nothing's broken, but she's not responding; it must be shock. Miss? Miss? Can you tell me where you were driving? Can you tell me your name?*

The giddiness had paralyzed her entire. The feeling of lightness, of flight, of freedom so huge and bright and terrifying that she had stared past the paramedics, stared at her father's body lumped in the thick black bag, and thought *Oh, no, this is too good. This is too bright.*

I can never do it again.

And the feeling of reckless escape stopped pressing glorious on the inside of her skull, and the manic joy abated, and she could blink, and focus her eyes, and go: *Officer?*

She put the gall bladder off the scale and noted down the numbers; tucked the pan decorously to the side of the big stainless-steel sink. Last organ. Nothing to do but sew the body up, wash everything clean, close the file, and call it an end. "And how will you prove these things?" she asked.

Daniel Brady straightened, and blinked, and went, "Pardon?"

*

Her results were not fast-tracked. It was unimportant. She waited.

Tallahassee had a question about the tumor, one she'd set aside for three full

days. She tapped an e-mail to them on her office computer, hunt-and-peck. There was an in-house consult to prepare for a child patient (thirteen years old, Cree, male; a leukemia that didn't look quite standard). A supplies requisition form for more hairnets, a replacement scale tray, and sample containers.

Work had a rhythm. Work was a series of small, indelible facts, and you could set them out like fences, or posts to hang the fences on. She gathered them, one by one, and waited.

There were no surprises in the laboratory reports: Early stages of organ failure. A preternatural amount of heavy foods in the stomach, digested erratically, with still more waiting in the lower intestines. Despite that, the brittle nails and hair and dry, flaking skin of the chronically malnourished. A sunken cast to the cheeks. Blood, that when tested was abnormally high in iron and trembling at the lowest threshold of glucose levels.

All the markers of one of Stephen Reyes's anomalous individuals.

The families of the anomalous rarely claimed their bodies, if there were families left standing. Even receiving an anomalous decedent sufficed, at this point, as permission. Frost prepared a large jar to house the brain and all its folds of evidence, and carefully wrote out the label.

She would dissect it later. When she was less fatigued. When the disquiet, the ache for theory and conjecture and bullshit had worn clean. She would dissect it and note down its abnormalities, its curls and quirks, its parameters in the cold, clean language of scientific fact.

*

Dr. Dawa arrived at her workspace late in the day, suitcase over one arm and a black wool trench coat over the other. It got dark early at this time of year. He stood shadowed against the false brightness of artificial lights and did not interrupt as she wiped down her table for the third time that evening.

"Dr. Dawa," she said when she looked up, and stood. He inclined his head, polite as ever.

"Dr. Frost. Hard at work, I see." He did not wait for a reply. He knew her habits better than that. "I wanted to touch base about that case you brought me."

Frost pushed the sponge, and felt that place in her head that made her different run truths, and lies, and numbers. "My consultancy on it has ended. The FBI were successful in apprehending their suspect," she said.

Dr. Dawa tilted his head down and met her eyes. "And medically?"

Her gaze didn't waver. She was not in the habit of lying, and that frequently made it easier to dodge the whole truth. "Medically," she said, "I have no further information. The families came forward to claim the bodies this afternoon."

All but one, she reminded herself; a jar, filled with fluid, in her cooler. All but one.

Dr. Dawa shifted his coat. He was not a preeminent pathologist for nothing, and he had not climbed the ranks to administration without reason. He knew she was withholding.

For this, she reflected, sudden and simple, *I could get in trouble.*

But: "Madeline," he said, surprisingly patient. "If it's classified, just tell me it's classified. It's not the answer I want to hear, but--" and he shrugged, short and fluid.

She let out her breath. Tucked her head. "I'm afraid it is."

Dawa nodded. The fluid on the sponge dripped, wended slowly down one gloved finger. "Do you expect we'll be able to follow up on this anytime soon?"

She was a pathologist, and not an investigator. She ruled out possibilities. She did not rule them in.

"I do not expect that we will," she said.

*

These were the facts: Charlotte Jane Frost died of exposure in the snow, half-drunk and furious, at exactly 3:32 a.m. Mountain Time on January 21, 1969. Her husband, Gerard Anthony Frost, had four hours prior locked all external doors to the residence, and taken away her keys. He went into his bedroom at five minutes past midnight, and did not emerge until dawn.

Her daughter, Madeline, failed to open her window, reachable by an adult climbing the old oak tree outside it. No investigating authority examined the physical evidence, including fingerprint marks, on the outside of said window in the twenty-four-hour period before they washed away.

Seven years later, after no incident witnesses could describe as a disagreement in the household, both Gerard and Madeline were involved in a multivehicle crash heading westbound, fifteen minutes outside of town. Gerard was not wearing his seat belt. He was propelled through the windshield at one hundred miles per hour and impacted upon the back of the transport truck in front of them. He died on impact. Madeline, sixteen, was wearing her seat belt. She survived.

*

"Pardon?" Brady had said, like a startled guide dog, and Madeline Frost peeled the gloves off her small, round hands and dropped them in the waste bin.

"You seem to be speaking primarily to motive," she said, and turned to face him fully. "I'd like to know what physical evidence you have on hand to assert the decedent's state of mind."

Brady's eyebrows rose like skyscrapers. "It's logic. His victims have what he doesn't, what he wants. They're happy. He's not. People don't kill each other for new reasons, you know."

"Perhaps they do," she said, and rummaged in the drawer for her needle. "Perhaps we don't find out because so many of them are in no condition for asking."

Brady stared at her a long, long moment. "You're baiting me," he said.

"I stick to the observable facts, Agent Brady," she replied, and threaded the needle taut. "Unless there was a confession of motive, I would not presume it, and it does not really matter."

He was still staring, vaulted up from what had been an easy lean on the edge of one of her counters. "So motive doesn't matter. Why doesn't matter. Aren't you even curious?"

"I am not," she said. Reached for a washcloth. For a bowl to fill with water, to wash the body clean. "I am curious about how, but that appears to be a dead issue."

"You can't be serious," he said.

"I am always serious," she replied. *It got better. I don't know how,* Audrey Gillespie's round ghost-voice said. *I guess I don't know much.* "It happened," she said. "It will not happen again. The facts are on the ground, and they can't be undone. Why, at this point, is immaterial."

"Oh, come on. Why people do things means something," he snapped.

A winter cold ghosted past her knuckles. She stopped, turned, fixed Daniel Brady in her stare. "No, Agent Brady," she said, unmoving, controlled as a fine bright scalpel. "It means nothing."

They stood there a moment, faced off, taut, until there was a tap on the door and a small, firm, "Excuse me?" The lab tech, her coat wrinkled and her long brown braid flopping over her shoulder, had opened the door and was frowning. "Everything all right here?" she asked.

Frost looked at Brady, at the decedent on her table, splayed and gutted and internally hollow, and nodded her head. "Yes," she said. "It is."

*

I didn't have a good home life growing up, the skinny black boy said, his voice fuzzed by the web camera, or the video quality, or her computer screen. *Yeah; people have had worse ones. But what's that saying, about how each unhappy family is unhappy in its own special way? It was some pretty special unhappiness*.

A long-haired, plump, bright Chinese woman tilted her head at the camera and said, *I know it seems bad now. I know it seems like the worst thing in the world; like your whole universe is being carpet-bombed day after day after day. But it won't always be like that. All these things are going to mean less than nothing one day, compared to what you'll have.*

A round-cheeked Southeast Asian boy sat on the lidded toilet seat of a dorm room bathroom stall, and leaned, fisheye close, into his laptop screen. *I'm happy here,* he said, and footsteps echoed past, and he bit his lip and smiled. *I really am.*

Madeline Frost closed her laptop and went upstairs.

Her toothbrush was tidy in the holder. She took it out, and the clean glass beside it, and brushed her teeth diligently for five minutes. Smoothed her short hair down into place. Shut off the bathroom light and left the door open behind her at the correct angle, and took three crisp strides to her bedroom to change into her long nightdress.

The branches of that oak tree were no longer rattling the windows. Arborists did not receive many pruning calls this time of year, and the young man they sent (Korean, five feet ten, approximately twenty-five to thirty years of age, black hair dyed with green tips, brown eyes) had been resistant to cutting back the branches with the temperatures finally falling. But he had, and her yard had the faint scent of chipped wood, and the night around her was quiet.

It was 1:23. She was fifty-one years old, and she was in her house in Guilford, Maryland, in the United States of America, the house she had bought with the insurance money; and the alarm system was armed, and every outside door double-locked and all the internal ones propped open, and every window could be opened from the inside, in case she needed to throw them wide at night.

Madeline turned down the blankets on her wide, white bed, and tucked herself beneath them.

The voice rattled softly in her head. Bruised her eyes. Pressed against her

skull. *Maddy, please baby, open the window, open up.*

She closed her eyes. The body flitted across the backs of them, livid and stiff with cold. And then the other: crumpled, hurled, so surprisingly small on the slick roadway, her fingers tingling with the feel and smell of metal buckles and her head exploding with transformation.

It was a comforting lie. Madeline Frost was fifty-one years old. It did not get better. You grew older, and more able to deal with the things done to you, the things you'd done. Or you did not. But they were always bad. They were always the same terrible things, no matter if you were not the same person anymore.

You could slice into, weigh, examine your own past endlessly, and find no reply.

She grew tired of this, some nights. She was tired of doing this autopsy, over and over again.

"Put it away," she said aloud, huddled underneath the sheets and blankets. They slowly warmed. "It's over. It's done."

She reached to her nightstand. Turned off the light.

Closed her eyes, and fell familiar into that crashing car.

Cause of death: Multiple gunshot wounds to left vena cava; exsanguination.

Manner of death: Homicide.

4.03 "Hope Is Stronger Than Love" - by Sarah Monette

Click here to play music.

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Act I

The Museum of the Free State of Franklin
Bell Creek, TN, November 2011

Everyone had had to bring a brown-bag lunch.

Patty's stepmother had grumbled about, What are we paying taxes for? the way she did whenever the school wanted her to spend money on Patty, and she'd provided baloney and French's Mustard on the whole wheat bread she bought because it was supposed to be healthier than white. Patty hated whole wheat bread, so she used the baloney to get as much of the mustard as she could and ate that.

"Aren't you going to eat your bread?" Stephanie asked.

"Nah," Patty said. "It's whole wheat. Whole wheat is gross."

"Can I have it?"

"Sure," Patty said, and watched while Stephanie ate two slices of bread in three bites. She'd already eaten all of her own lunch. "You want my apple, too?"

"Don't you want it?" Stephanie said, looking at the apple longingly.

"I'm not hungry," Patty said. It was sort of true, and anyway, Stephanie was her best friend.

"Thanks," Stephanie said, and the apple disappeared about as fast as the bread.

"Didn't you eat breakfast this morning?" Patty said.

"No, I did," Stephanie said. "I'm just really hungry. Do you think they've got vending machines here?"

Patty looked around dubiously. Everything was log cabins and wooden

fences, and the closest thing she could see to a vending machine was a rusty old piece of farm equipment that she couldn't even imagine what it was for. "D'you wanna ask Miss Harrison if we can go look? Or we could say we need to go to the bathroom?"

"Yeah, maybe," Stephanie said. "I--"

"Hey, lookit the lezbos!"

Patty went cold. It was Chris Watson; he'd finished lunch and was bored, and everybody knew Patty and Stephanie were easy game. "You're sure sitting close enough together--why aren't you holding hands?"

"Shut up, Chris," Stephanie said. Her face had gone a funny color under the freckles, and she was looking at Chris like she was thinking maybe, if they couldn't find a vending machine, she'd just eat him next.

But of course, it was never *just* Chris. Mike Odell was smirking all over his ugly face and starting to singsong, "Patty and Steph'nie, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

Stephanie made a weird yowling noise and got up. Patty got up, too, although she wasn't sure why.

"Oooh, you gonna fight me, Slimer?" Chris said. "'Cause that's what lezbos do, you know."

"Fight!" somebody said--Annie Morales, Patty thought, but she was never sure, because the others took up the chant so quickly: "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Patty looked around desperately, but she couldn't see Miss Harrison. Stephanie made another weird yowl. Chris was opening his mouth again, and the thought went straight through Patty's mind that she wanted Chris Watson to die.

All at once, his eyes were dripping blood. Even when she tried to think carefully later, Patty couldn't remember any warning, any sign that something was about to happen. Just Chris Watson with his mouth half open and blood pouring down his face.

And she'd wished it. Oh, Jesus, she had. It was all true.

Patty MacIntyre turned and ran.

Act II

Coriam, TN, August - October 2011

Patty had always known she was a witch.

One of her earliest memories was of her father showing her the pictures of Grandmother Whittaker, the old yellow newspaper clippings of what Grandmother Whittaker had done. Some of the earliest words Patty learned to read were "Woman Slays Seven, Then Self."

Her daddy explained it to her, how Grandmother Whittaker had made a deal with the Devil and the Devil had given her the power to kill just by wishing it. That part wasn't in the newspapers, but Daddy's cousin Lewis was a deputy sheriff, and Cousin Lewis told Daddy all about the witness testimony, and how Grandmother Whittaker hadn't had a gun or a knife or anything. She'd just looked at those people and they'd fallen down dead. And the first person she'd killed was her husband, which just proved (Daddy said) that it was the Devil in her.

For a long time, Patty had thought Grandmother Whittaker had killed Mama, too, and it wasn't until she got old enough to do the math that she realized that couldn't be right. Mama had been five years old in 1983, when Grandmother Whittaker killed seven people by wishing. She hadn't died until she was twenty-six, and that was in 2004, just after Patty's fourth birthday.

It had been a while before she got up the nerve to ask Daddy about it, because Mama was one of those things they just didn't talk about. There were a lot of things like that in the MacIntyre household, Patty was realizing. She'd made a list once, and when it got past ten items, she'd had to stop and burn it very carefully in the kitchen sink. Mom--as Patty was supposed to call her stepmother, and she didn't mind, much--didn't like it when anybody mentioned that Daddy'd had a wife before her, even if it was Reverend Miller saying how much better Mom was for Daddy. And Daddy'd give you the silent treatment if you tried to talk about things he didn't like.

But Patty really wanted to know. She'd looked through the scrapbook about Grandmother Whittaker when Mom and Daddy had gone off to her half brother Jeremy's first grade Parents' Night, and there was nothing except in Grandfather Whittaker's obituary that "Daniel Whittaker is survived by his two daughters, Lee (age 9) and Norma (age 5)," and Patty knew that already, just like she knew Mama and Aunt Lee had been taken in by Reverend Johnson, who'd been the church preacher before Reverend Miller. And Mama'd grown up and married Daddy, and Aunt Lee had grown up and gone off to Knoxville, where church gossip was she was living with a woman. Patty'd never met Aunt Lee; Daddy wouldn't let her in the house.

But there wasn't anything about how Mama had died, and finally, one Sunday afternoon when Mom had taken Jeremy to visit Aunt Cathy, Patty screwed up her courage and asked her father.

He'd given her a hard look, and she'd thought he wasn't going to answer, but he said, "It was the Devil. The Devil was trying to take her over, and it killed

her."

"Did--did she say so?"

"I knew," he said. "I came home from work, and she was lying on the kitchen floor, stone cold and not a mark on her--but such a look on her face. She was going the same way as her mother, and I thank Jesus that she was not strong enough to bear the load. Just as I thank Jesus every night that you'd been playing with one of your little friends."

"Oh," said Patty.

"You have to guard against the Devil, Patty," her father said. "There's a strain of wickedness in the women of your family. Just look at your mother's sister. It's an abomination in the eyes of God."

It wasn't long after that that Chris Watson started calling her and Stephanie lezbos, and although Patty knew it was just Chris Watson being a stupid jerk, part of her couldn't help wondering if he was actually seeing the wickedness in her.

She'd told Stephanie the whole thing, one weekend that summer when her parents had finally, grudgingly agreed that she could sleep over at Stephanie's house. They'd lain in sleeping bags on air mattresses in Stephanie's basement under Stephanie's poster of North American snakes that her mom wouldn't let her hang in her room, and Patty had whispered one horrible truth after another, the first time she'd said any of them out loud. Stephanie had listened respectfully and when Patty was done, said, "Do you really think your grandma was a witch?"

"I don't know," Patty said. "Daddy says she was."

"Because I read a book once about witches," Stephanie said. "They used to burn them, you know."

"They did not!"

"Honest to God. And they used to throw them in lakes to see if they'd float."

"What does that have to do with being a witch?"

"I don't know," Stephanie said. "It seems like a weird thing to do."

"So were you a witch if you floated or if you sank?" Patty asked.

"I can't remember. Do you want to test it?"

So Saturday, they'd bugged Stephanie's mom into taking them to the pool, where first Patty had tried to float and then she'd tried to sink, and neither seemed to work very well.

"Maybe you're not a witch," Stephanie said.

"Maybe this is a stupid test," said Patty, and they both started giggling.

The first Wednesday of the school year, Stephanie came home with Patty after school, and they found Mom had had to go out. "EMERGENCY!" said the note. "NO TP!" Patty got the spare key from where the family hid it, and they went inside. Patty was about to ask what Stephanie wanted to do, when Stephanie said, "Hey, remember you told me about your grandma?"

"Yeah?"

"You said there was a scrapbook."

"You wanna see it?" Patty said, surprised.

Stephanie was beet red, but she nodded, so Patty went and stood very carefully on Daddy's recliner to get the scrapbook down from the top of the bookcase. "Let's take it up to my room," she said. "I don't think Mom will notice it's not there if she gets back, but if she sees it..."

"Okay," said Stephanie, and they sat side by side on Patty's bedroom floor and went through the whole thing. When they were done, Stephanie went back to the first page, where there was a portrait photo of Grandmother Whittaker, and looked at it for a long time.

"She kind of looks like a witch, doesn't she?" Patty said.

"Yeah," Stephanie said.

Then, since Mom still hadn't come home, Patty went downstairs and put the scrapbook back. She jumped off the recliner and gave a huge sigh of relief to make Stephanie giggle, and then said, "So, what do you wanna do?" By the time Mom finally came in with a long dramatic story about running into Patty's Sunday school teacher in front of the toilet paper, they were practicing catching pop flies in the backyard, and Patty felt like she'd gotten away with something huge.

And then, the first day of October, Patty started her period, and everything got *really* weird. She'd expected, and dreaded, the "you're a woman now" speech, but she hadn't expected Mom--who would discuss her own menstrual cramps with the mail carrier, for Pete's sake--to be so *nervous* about it. And she hadn't expected Daddy to care at all.

But he did. He wouldn't play catch with her anymore, even though she *still* hadn't learned how to catch his curveball or tell stories about the year his high school baseball team were state champions. Instead, he started watching Patty like he thought she was going to make a deal with the Devil right there in front of him, and when that got her wigged out so bad she started spending

evenings in her room--with the door open because Mom and Daddy both pitched a fit if she closed it--he'd come upstairs two or three times an evening, as far as she could tell just so he could walk past her room.

And he started spending a lot of time with Cousin Lewis, which he hadn't done since he married Mom. Mom didn't like Cousin Lewis, and what was weird was, not only was Daddy inviting him over to watch football on Sundays and stuff like that, Mom wasn't complaining. Patty was so completely weirded out that she did something she'd never done in her life before and tried to eavesdrop.

It wasn't actually all that hard, since the living room was right off the stairs, and Daddy and Cousin Lewis both had deep voices that carried. The worst part was having to be ready to bolt if it sounded like Daddy or Cousin Lewis was going to come out of the living room or if Mom or Jeremy was going to come out of the kitchen. And to show how weird things had gotten, she was actually kind of comforted that Mom wouldn't let Jeremy in the living room, because it showed she *still* didn't like Cousin Lewis, even if she wasn't saying so anymore.

And there was Patricia Margaret MacIntyre, sitting on the stairs in the dark with her heart beating triple-time, *eavesdropping.* She wanted to die of shame. But she listened.

Mostly, what she heard was boring. Football and Daddy's work and Cousin Lewis's work, which you'd think would be interesting, him being a deputy and all, but it was just speeding tickets and drunk high school kids. But the third or fourth time Cousin Lewis came over, Patty got desperate, and she waited until Mom and Jeremy had gone to bed, and then she snuck back out onto the stairs, even though she was pushing her luck, because if Mom came out of the master bedroom for anything, Patty was totally caught. Even if she'd been any good at lying, which she wasn't, there was no lie she could tell. Eavesdropping.

So she was guilty and terrified and feeling kind of sick, but she crept down as far as she dared. Daddy and Cousin Lewis were watching ESPN, and Patty was really starting to hate the way sports announcers talked, like everything out of their mouths was the most exciting thing they'd ever said. But the second time the sound went off for commercials, instead of Daddy grumbling about Coach Fisher and everything he was doing wrong, there was this silence.

Holding her breath, Patty scooted down another step.

"I couldn't get a look at the memo," Cousin Lewis said, "but I talked to Carmen and she remembered it pretty good. Sudden changes in mood, increase in appetite, violent behavior--"

"Paula Whittaker sure had all those," Patty's daddy said.

"And then there was a bunch of stuff about the victims," Cousin Lewis said. "Carmen said it was mostly looking for cases where the cause of death didn't make sense."

"Like Paula Whittaker again."

"Yeah. Basically, Jerry, everything Carmen mentioned matched up with the Whittaker case. Even to it taking fifteen rounds to bring her down."

"So the FBI's hunting witches," Daddy said. "But they don't want anybody to know."

"That's sure what it looks like to me," said Cousin Lewis, and then they didn't say anything else, not until the game came back on, and Patty crept back up to her room, shaking so hard she couldn't even make it to her bed, but folded up on the floor, sick with fear and shame. She didn't get any homework done that night, and she couldn't sleep, lying there in bed with all her muscles tense, staring at the gray blotch of the ceiling in the dark and wondering when the Devil would come and if he'd find her before the FBI did.

She felt half dead the next day at school, and she couldn't even tell Stephanie what was wrong. When she tried, the words jammed in her throat, and even though she knew that was just a figure of speech, the block felt so real she almost couldn't breathe around it. Family history was one thing, but the FBI was...they were *real.* They were *on TV.* Being a witch was horrible, but it was also, horribly, kind of neat. Stephanie thought so, that was for sure, and Patty was ashamed of herself for being almost proud of the way the story about her grandmother made Stephanie pay attention to her. But being hunted by the FBI, God, they'd arrest her and put her in jail and she'd have to wear those orange overalls and be handcuffed all the time, and everyone would be so ashamed of her. They wouldn't talk about her, not just the way they didn't talk about Mama, but the way they didn't talk about Mom's brother Dennis, who'd gotten in some kind of trouble, although Patty didn't know what, and skipped out to Florida or somewhere, where he spent all his time drunk and doing drugs. Patty'd almost wanted to be a witch, if it would make her be like Mama, but she didn't want to be like Dennis. She didn't want to see *that* look on Mom's face, the one she always had when she got off the phone with Grandma Karen and Patty knew Grandma Karen had been crying about Dennis again.

Patty felt like crying herself a lot of that October, and she was a little sick to her stomach most of the time. At least it meant she wasn't hungry, so there was none of that increase in appetite Cousin Lewis had mentioned. And she knew Daddy was watching for it. There was nobody she could tell, and there was nothing she could think of that she could do. If she couldn't bring herself

to tell Stephanie, she certainly wasn't going to tell any of the girls on her softball team, most of whom she didn't even *like.* She couldn't tell any of her teachers. She almost talked herself into going to Reverend Miller, but she didn't really trust him, and she was pretty sure the first thing he'd do was tell Daddy. And what could he tell her to do anyway, except pray? And she was already praying, every night and sometimes in the middle of the day if the sick feeling got too bad. *Please, God, I don't want to be a witch. I don't want the Devil to make a deal with me. Please don't let him.* And she had the horrible feeling it wasn't enough. Because surely Mama had prayed like that. Mama wouldn't have wanted to be a witch. Patty was as sure about that as she was about anything. And all it had gotten Mama was dead.

*

Patty knew her mother's gravestone by heart:

Norma Christine MacIntyre
1978-2004
Mother and Wife
God watches your rest

Act III

The Museum of the Free State of Franklin
Bell Creek, TN, November 2011

Patty ran as far as the parking lot, where the school bus was waiting. The door was open, and Mr. Kennedy must have gone for a smoke or something, so she dodged up the steps and ran to the back and threw herself flat on the very last seat, dark green shiny vinyl and that weird smell like raisins from being in the sun. And she lay there and shook and tried not to think about Chris Watson's face and tried not to hear anything, although she couldn't help hearing the screams. And the way they stopped. And then the new screams. Adults this time, and she thought that was Miss Harrison screaming "Oh God oh God oh God." Patty pressed her face harder into the vinyl and tried not to make any sound.

The police sirens, shrieking and wailing, made her chest hurt, like all that noise was getting lodged behind her ribs in a big hateful bubble, swelling and swelling. Finally, she pushed her face into the seat cushion and screamed as long and hard as she could without using her voice.

That was about when the sirens stopped, and when Patty could think again, she knew what she had to do. It made her feel sick, but she had to.

She got up and walked to the front of the bus, hanging onto the seat backs when it seemed like her legs weren't going to hold her up. She had to grip the

rail on the steps with both hands, and even so she nearly ended up sitting on the asphalt when she took the last step and her knees just kept going.

Buckle up your guts, Patty, she said to herself, the way Mom did in the dentist's office. She had to do this.

There was an ambulance and two police cars, all still with their lights going, and the parking lot seemed ten miles long. The little group of adults standing by one of the police cars just wasn't getting any closer. Two policemen, the lady from the museum who'd taken them around, Miss Harrison, and two of the other fifth grade teachers, Mrs. Ledbetter and Mr. Phipps. Mr. Haines and Mrs. Armstrong must be watching the other kids. Patty was a softball pitch from the police car when one of the policemen noticed her. All of the adults swung around, and Miss Harrison screamed, "Patty! Oh thank Jesus!" She ran at Patty and hugged her so hard that Patty's face was jammed into Miss Harrison's reading glasses that she wore on a fancy chain around her neck.

Miss Harrison was normally kind of sarcastic and a lot of kids thought she was mean. Patty and Stephanie had thought she just didn't like fifth graders much. So if she was weeping all over Patty like this--Patty swallowed hard--things had to be about as bad as she thought.

"Judy," said Mrs. Ledbetter, "let her breathe." When Patty got free of Miss Harrison, she found that the other adults had come up around them. Mrs. Ledbetter and Mr. Phipps looked nearly as unstrung as Miss Harrison, and the policemen looked worried and serious. The lady from the museum had gone a horrible color, sort of greenish-grayish-white, and her blush stood out on her cheekbones like red paint.

Mrs. Ledbetter was the fifth grade teacher Patty liked best, and she looked like she'd give a straight answer. Patty asked her, "Is Chris Watson dead?"

The way Mrs. Ledbetter's face crumpled was answer enough--just as well, because the next second it seemed like everybody was yelling at her, *Patty, did you see what happened? Were you there? Did you see who did this?*

"Hold on!" It was one of the policemen; he had a good deep bellow. "Give the little girl some room here." He squatted down in front of her. His eyes were very dark, and they were kind. "What's your name, honey?"

"Patty MacIntyre," Patty said, and then wondered if she should have said Patricia.

But the policeman nodded and said, "I'm Officer Stanton. Patty, a lot of kids are dead--" Miss Harrison started to say something, but Officer Stanton shot this *look* at her over Patty's shoulder, and she shut up. He looked back at Patty and said, "We need your help, honey. We need to catch whoever did this."

Patty realized like a punch to the stomach that they didn't know. They didn't know it was her fault. For a wild, sick second, she thought about lying, about saying there was a man who came and...and what? It wasn't like she'd shot Chris Watson or anything else that just anybody could do. And she was no good at lying anyway.

"You have to arrest me," she said to Officer Stanton.

He rocked back on his heels. "Arrest *you?* Honey, why would we want to do that?"

"Because I did it," Patty said. "I killed Chris Watson and...and everybody else, I guess." And because she could see he didn't believe her, she said the rest of it, as heavy as rocks, "I'm a witch. I witched them to death."

And then Patty MacIntyre embarrassed herself very much by bursting into tears.

Act IV

Coriam, TN, October 2011

They were doing a unit in Social Studies on local history and using primary sources. It was really confusing, and neither Stephanie nor Patty nor anybody else understood why something was a secondary source when it was *about* the thing you were studying. But Patty and Stephanie had agreed that they'd better do their project the way Mr. Haines wanted, so they went to the Coriam Public Library one day after school and got even more confused by the librarian. Patty had a feeling this project wasn't going to get a very good grade.

But something the librarian had said stuck with her. She'd said that the library had all of the *Coriam Gazette*. All of it, from the very first issue. And that meant they'd have Mama's obituary, because the *Coriam Gazette* had everybody's obituary, old people and babies and people who didn't even die in Coriam. Everybody.

She didn't tell Stephanie. She didn't know why, and she was on the edge of telling her half a dozen times. But she didn't. It didn't feel like something she wanted to share. She went back to the library on her own. It was a different librarian, younger and nicer, and when Patty said she wanted to see the obituaries for 2004, the librarian didn't try to tell her she didn't, but took her down to the library's basement and showed her how to work the microfiche reader and told her how to find the obituaries in each week of the *Gazette*. And something about how she wasn't asking and wasn't trying to make like she knew better than Patty made Patty say, "It's my mama. She died when I was just little."

"Oh, honey, of *course* you want to see it," the librarian said. "You just come get me if you have any questions." And she left Patty there like she was an adult and trustworthy instead of a little girl.

It was hard to figure out the microfiche reader at first, but Patty got the hang of it pretty quick. And that was good, because she was into September 2004 before she found what she was looking for. It wasn't a very long article, not like some of the obituaries she'd skimmed through, just Norma MacIntyre, twenty-six, survived by husband and daughter, died Tuesday of an aneurysm.

Patty got out her notebook and wrote the word down, checking twice to be sure she'd spelled it correctly. "Aneurysm." Then she put the microfiche back in its box and turned off the machine, the way the librarian had said, and went back up the stairs.

"Did you find it, honey?" said the librarian.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," Patty said, and she walked home. She was late, but Mom didn't ask any more questions after Patty said she'd missed the bus, just said, like she always did, that Patty had to get her head out of the clouds and pay more attention.

Patty waited until Mom went upstairs with the laundry before she dragged the dictionary out of the bookcase.

Looking up "aneurysm" led to looking up a bunch of other words, and then to looking things up on Stephanie's computer when Stephanie was busy finishing her math homework and couldn't lean over Patty's shoulder to see what she was doing, but in the end, Patty was pretty sure she understood. Something in her mama, probably in her brain, had broken and killed her. That was scary, because apparently there wasn't any way to know if you had an aneurysm until it killed you, but also it happened enough that it didn't get called "rare" or "unusual" or anything. You didn't have to be a witch to die of an aneurysm. Really, Patty thought, remembering her daddy's stories about how hard her grandmother was to kill, if you died of an aneurysm, it was almost proof you *weren't* a witch. She was pretty sure her Grandmother Whittaker wouldn't have let anything like a burst blood vessel stop her.

So maybe Patty's mama hadn't been a witch.

Maybe there was hope.

Act V

Bell Creek, TN, November 2011

They didn't believe her. Mr. Phipps and Miss Harrison scolded her for making

up stories about something so horrible, and Mrs. Ledbetter tried to talk to her about "sometimes we *believe* things but they aren't true," and the museum lady and the other policeman just looked at her like she was crazy while it was like Officer Stanton thought he could find the truth--the man with the gun--if he just kept asking questions, like Patty'd just *forgotten* or something. But no one believed her, and all Patty could do was sit in the back of the police car and tell them what happened over and over again. "I wished Chris Watson was dead and he started bleeding from his eyes."

And then the FBI showed up.

They didn't look like FBI agents on TV. One was tall and skinny skinny skinny, and the other one was short and mostly bald and looked like Patty's favorite teacher ever, Mr. Donovan in second grade. But they weren't dressed in police uniforms and she saw the badge the skinny one showed Officer Stanton, and anyway she'd known the FBI would come for her. She'd just thought it would take longer.

The two agents talked together, the tall one sort of hunching down to listen to the short one, and then they split up. The tall one went off with the lady from the museum and the other policeman, while the short one followed Officer Stanton over to where Patty was sitting.

"Patty, this is Mr. Todd," Officer Stanton said. "He needs to talk to you for a minute, and he needs you to tell him the truth."

"I *will,*" Patty said and hated the way her voice came out, all blaring and sullen.

"Hi, Patty," said the short man. "I'm Solomon Todd." Instead of crouching down next to the car to talk to her the way all the other adults had, he plopped down cheerfully cross-legged on the asphalt.

"Are you an FBI agent?" Patty asked, suddenly unsure again.

"I used to be," said Mr. Todd, smiling in a way that showed all the crinkles around his eyes. "I'm retired now, but they let me come on field trips sometimes."

"But the other one's an FBI agent," Patty persisted. She had to be sure. And Mr. Todd nodded.

"Then y'all are here to take me away," Patty said and managed not to ask, *Can we just get it over with?*

Mr. Todd had gone very still. "Are we, Patty?"

"Because I'm a witch." All at once, she thought she understood. "It's okay, Mr. Todd. I know the FBI is hunting witches. I heard Cousin Lewis explaining it

to Daddy."

"Witches," Mr. Todd said under his breath, and for a second there was a really weird look on his face before he smoothed it out. "Patty, why do you think you're a witch?"

"Because I *am,*" Patty said, and she told him about Chris Watson.

"There's something else, isn't there?" he said gently, and it all spilled out, Grandmother Whittaker and Mama and Daddy watching her and Stephanie saying they used to burn witches and Cousin Lewis saying the FBI was looking for witches and *everything.* And Mr. Todd listened and didn't interrupt and didn't tell her not to make things up and she could see he believed her like Stephanie had.

Stephanie.

"Oh God, did I kill Stephanie, too?"

"Stephanie Silmer?"

Patty nodded, but the fact that Mr. Todd knew Stephanie's name told Patty the truth even before he said, "I'm sorry, Patty."

"I didn't want to kill her!" Patty said. Her voice had gone all loud and flat again. "I didn't want to make a deal with the Devil!" She sniffed hard and wetly, and Mr. Todd pulled a packet of Kleenex out of his suit coat and handed it to her.

"Keep it," he said. "Patty, are you hungry?"

"Not really?" Patty said; she couldn't tell what answer he wanted.

"Huh," he said and pushed to his feet. "You sit tight for a minute, kiddo. Okay?" And he turned and jogged to where his tall skinny friend was just coming over the rise.

They walked back toward Patty, talking and gesturing. They were just to where she could hear them when the tall one stopped. "As in, 'they're coming to take me away, ha ha'?"

"Focus, Grasshopper," Mr. Todd said sternly, and then they both lowered their voices, glancing over at Patty, so she tried to look like she hadn't been listening. Their conversation only took another minute, and then they came over to her and Mr. Todd said, "Patty, this is Mr. Villette. We're going to ask you to come with us, but we're not taking you away, all right? We just want to talk to you somewhere more comfortable."

"And we'll call your parents," said Mr. Villette. "Is there an adult you'd like to come with you? Your teacher, maybe?"

She didn't want Miss Harrison, who would either be sarcastic or weepy. "Could you ask Mrs. Ledbetter?"

"Okay," said Mr. Todd. "We'll take our car."

Mr. Villette gave her a funny wrinkled-nose smile and held out his hand. She wasn't sure for a second if she should hold hands with an FBI agent, but she didn't want to make him feel bad. His hand was enormous, but he didn't squeeze at all.

He said, "Mr. Todd says Stephanie Silmer was your best friend."

"Yeah," Patty said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That's really rough."

"I didn't want her to die," Patty said.

"I know," he said, and he sounded like he *did* know.

Mrs. Ledbetter got in the back of the FBI agents' car with Patty. "Are you doing all right, Patty?"

"Yes, ma'am," Patty said, hoping Mrs. Ledbetter wouldn't ask why it was her and not Miss Harrison Patty had wanted.

Mrs. Ledbetter didn't ask; she leaned forward to talk to Mr. Villette and Mr. Todd. About TVA and the economy and all the men in town like Stephanie's dad who didn't have jobs anymore. Patty stared out the window and tried not to think about Stephanie. She didn't want to start crying again.

They didn't have far to go, just to the Bell Creek police station where they went into a room with fake wood paneling and a worn-down, dark mustard-yellow carpet. There was a big window in one wall that looked into another room. Patty wondered if the other side was mirrored like in police stations on TV, or if the Bell Creek police officers didn't bother.

Mr. Todd sat at the end of the table farthest from the window and Mr. Villette sat next to him facing the door. Patty sat opposite Mr. Villette and Mrs. Ledbetter sat next to her. The police officer who'd led them to this room said, "Can I get y'all a Coke or anything?"

"Decaf coffee?" Mr. Villette said hopefully.

"You got it," the officer said. "You want anything, honey?"

"I'd really like a Coke," Patty said. Mom would have a fit, but right now that seemed like the least of Patty's worries.

"Sure thing. Anyone else?"

"Just water, please," said Mr. Todd, and Mrs. Ledbetter said, "Yes. Water, please."

"Just a moment," said the officer.

While he was gone, Mr. Todd got out a little recorder and set it up, testing it with his name and the date and "Bell Creek, Tennessee," just like the *X-Files* episodes Patty wasn't supposed to watch. And, oh God, that shouldn't be like a knife in the chest, but it was, because she'd watched *X-Files* at Stephanie's house, off Stephanie's parents' DVD box sets. Mr. Silmer had watched with them, sometimes, and those were the nicest memories she had of Stephanie's dad. And it was one more thing that was never going to happen again.

Mr. Todd played his date stamp back and smiled at Patty. "You wouldn't believe how mean my boss gets when I give him a .wav file full of static."

"Have you done that?"

"A couple times. Once was on purpose." He winked at her.

The officer came back with a cup of coffee in one hand and two bottles of water in the other, with a Coke can tucked under his elbow. He handed the drinks around, said, "Let me know if you need anything," and closed the door behind him on the way out.

Mr. Todd opened his water and took a swallow. Then he turned his recorder on, said, "Interview with Patty MacIntyre. Okay, Patty. I know you've told me this story before, but I need you to tell it again for my boss in Virginia."

"And for me," Mr. Villette said. He sounded kind of fierce, and Patty was startled into looking directly at him. He was watching her, almost staring, and she saw that his eyes didn't match. Nicky, her best friend in first grade, had had a dog with different colored eyes, but Patty hadn't known people could have eyes like that. She looked away. Even if he was staring at her, it was rude to stare back.

"Okay," she said and tried to sound like she meant it. "Wh-where do you want me to start?"

"Where do you think the beginning is?" Mr. Todd asked.

Patty swallowed hard and looked at the recorder so she wouldn't have to look at Mr. Villette or Mr. Todd or Mrs. Ledbetter. "My grandmother was a witch." She told the story again, but this time Mr. Todd asked questions. Lots of questions. He said it was okay if Patty didn't know the answers, but she wasn't sure if he meant it. When she mentioned the scrapbook, Mr. Villette started asking questions, too, and it got to where she wasn't telling the story at all, just sort of bouncing from question to question. They were asking a lot of questions about Stephanie, and Patty wished they wouldn't.

Then they started asking about the field trip. Mr. Todd wanted to know what the Free State of Franklin was and why there was a museum for it and why they were having a field trip, so Patty told him about the Tennessee Studies unit in the fifth grade Social Studies classes and how they were supposed to be learning about the history of where they lived, but everybody knew field trips like this were just a way to give the teachers a break. She caught herself too late, and felt her face flood red.

Mrs. Ledbetter, though, just laughed a little and said, "That's really not how we try to pitch it."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ledbetter. I didn't mean--"

"It's all right, Patty. You're allowed to have opinions."

"Even if..."

"The Museum of the Free State of Franklin is an incredibly valuable historical resource," Mrs. Ledbetter said, "but it's never one of our more successful field trips."

"You have to keep trying," Mr. Todd said.

"Yes," Mrs. Ledbetter said, and she sounded tired and sad. "We keep--" Her voice broke, and she said, raw and watery and blaring, "Oh, God *damn* it."

Patty handed Mrs. Ledbetter the packet of Kleenex Mr. Todd had given her.

"Thank you, honey," Mrs. Ledbetter said, and she pulled back from the table a little. Patty wished she didn't have to know what Mrs. Ledbetter sounded like when she was crying.

"So you were all pretty bored," Mr. Villette said to Patty.

"Um."

"The truth isn't going to hurt anybody," Mr. Todd said.

"It's not a very interesting museum," Patty said apologetically. "Just a bunch of old farm equipment and maps and stuff. When we went to the museum in Oak Ridge, at least there was stuff to *do,* you know? And a machine that made your hair stand on end."

"A Van de Graaff generator," Mr. Villette said.

"Yeah," Patty said. "That was neat. But this was just old stuff."

"Is that why Christopher Watson started verbally harassing you? Because he was bored?"

"Probably," Patty said uncomfortably and shrugged. "But I don't know why

Chris Watson does anything. Did anything, I mean." She swallowed hard. "I wished him dead, you know."

"That's what you told me," Mr. Todd agreed. "How did you do it?"

"What?"

"Tell us what happened," Mr. Villette said. "For our boss in Virginia."

So Patty told them about Chris Watson being mean and calling Stephanie "Slimer" and saying they were lesbians. "He was trying to get Stephanie to fight him, and I think she was really going to. And I wished he was dead. Just like that. Like..." She didn't know how to describe it. "And I looked at Chris Watson and there was blood pouring out of his eyes."

"Is that how your grandmother killed her victims?" Mr. Todd asked.

"She wished them dead," Patty said.

"No, I mean, bleeding from the eyes. Is that how she did it?"

"I don't know. I know there was blood everywhere. Daddy told me that."

Mr. Todd and Mr. Villette gave each other a kind of funny look. Patty wasn't sure what it meant, whether they believed her or whether they really didn't.

"Patty," said Mr. Villette, "are you hungry at all?"

"No," Patty said. But she took a long drink of her Coke, because she was thirsty after all that talking.

"What have you eaten today?" said Mr. Todd.

Patty looked sideways at Mrs. Ledbetter, who said, "Go on, honey," even though she looked as confused as Patty felt.

"Well, I had breakfast," Patty said. "Frosted Flakes, and Mom made me take a banana on the bus, but I gave half of it to Stephanie."

"And lunch?" said Mr. Todd.

"I gave most of it to Stephanie," Patty said, and her voice blared and broke because she was starting to cry again.

"Stephanie was hungry," Mr. Villette said, sort of half asking and half not.

Patty nodded convulsively and gulped and blew her nose with one of Mr. Todd's Kleenex. "Stephanie was really hungry. We were going to go look for a vending machine when Chris started being a jerk."

"Huh," said Mr. Villette. He and Mr. Todd exchanged another one of those looks, and Mr. Todd said, "Excuse me just a moment. I need to make a phone

call."

He left the room, and Patty and Mrs. Ledbetter and Mr. Villette sat silently. Patty stared down at her hands so she wouldn't have to try to make eye contact with either adult. Her hands were filthy, she saw, with dirt grimed under the fingernails and big patches of dirt across both palms. Like she'd fallen down, although she didn't remember it happening.

Come to think of it, she didn't remember much of anything between pushing past Kelly Roberts and climbing up the stairs of the bus. So maybe she had fallen. Mrs. Ledbetter cleared her throat and said, "I don't want to tell y'all your job, but are you just about done with Patty? Her father should be getting here any time now."

Patty's stomach disappeared. "You won't let him burn me, will you?"

"Let him *what?*" said Mr. Villette.

"It's what they did to witches," Patty said. "He said it's what they should've done to my grandmother."

"Actually, in America, they hanged witches," Mr. Villette said, "and nobody's going to do anything of the sort."

"I'd really rather you arrested me," Patty said in a little voice.

"Honey, your daddy isn't going to burn you," Mrs. Ledbetter said, as Mr. Todd came back in the room. "He's just going to be so grateful you're alive."

Mrs. Ledbetter didn't know Daddy and how he felt about witches.

Mr. Todd sat down and said, "We'll talk with your father, Patty."

"Okay," Patty said, although she wasn't sure Daddy would pay much attention to Mr. Todd and Mr. Villette, one short, the other skinny, and both of them Yankees.

"Patty," Mr. Villette said, not mean but sharp, like a teacher getting somebody's attention, "I need you to help me with something before your dad gets here."

"Okay," Patty said. "If I can."

"You can," Mr. Villette said, and he smiled at her. It was a nice smile, and it made her feel a little better. He flipped his legal pad to a clean page. "I'm going to draw a map, and I need you to tell me where everybody was standing when Chris Watson's eyes started bleeding."

Mrs. Ledbetter made a noise like she was going to say something, but Mr. Villette looked up and met her eyes. "She's our only eyewitness," he said

calmly. "And it's not like she doesn't know what happened."

"I'll do my best," Patty said, and questions to answer were better than having to sit and think about it inside her own head.

"Okay," said Mr. Villette, and he started drawing, neat, quick, precise lines that laid out the Museum of the Free State of Franklin like he'd been studying it all his life. He even sketched in the rusty farm equipment--a plow or a thresher or whatever it was--that Patty and Stephanie had been sitting near.

"Wow," Patty said, and he gave her a funny sidelong look.

Mr. Todd said, "Mr. Villette is a man of many talents."

"Shut up, Mr. Todd," said Mr. Villette, but Patty could tell he wasn't mad. "Now, Patty, where were you?"

That was easy, and she put a finger on his map to show him. He drew a circle and labeled it in tiny perfect capitals *PMacI.* "And Stephanie?"

"Right next to me," Patty said, and pointed. He drew another circle and labeled it *SS.*

"Good. Where was Chris Watson?"

"Just in front of Stephanie." And then she remembered he couldn't know which way Stephanie was facing. "Between her and the auditorium building."

"How close? Arm's reach? Could she have hit him without moving?"

"No, he knew better than to get that close. She punched him in the mouth last year. But--" She shut her eyes to remember better. "She looked like she was going to sort of lunge at him, and she could have reached him."

"Okay. We'll say there-ish," said Mr. Villette, and she opened her eyes to watch him draw another circle, *CW.* "You mentioned another boy."

"Odell," Mr. Todd said quietly.

"Right. Michael Odell. Where was he?"

That was harder. She hadn't been looking at Mike Odell; she'd been watching Stephanie. "He wasn't as close as Chris. Back behind to the right, I think."

MO on the map. "Who else?"

She squinched her eyes shut, trying to call back the ring of staring, gleeful faces. "Annie Morales was off to my left, and Olivia Schroeder was next to her, with Erin and Cammie and Amber. Brandon Chen was behind Chris, and Johnny Patterson must've been next to him because he always is." Her throat seized up for a moment before she could correct herself. "I mean, was. And

everybody else was back kind of spread out between the auditorium and the parking lot. I remember I had to push past Kelly and Madison--Madison Becker, not Madison Petrie--when I...when I ran."

Her eyes came open, even though right then, she really didn't want to look at anybody, but it was like Mr. Villette had gotten there first, because he was already saying, "Patty, you did the right thing."

"But how come it didn't work?"

"What do you mean?"

"They all *died.* And if I witched Chris and ran, how come... I mean, what did I *do?* I didn't mean to!" She was about to start crying again, and she sniffed hard and pushed the heels of her hands against her eyes.

"You didn't," Mr. Todd said, and he didn't sound like Mrs. Ledbetter trying to tell her she'd just been playing make-believe; he sounded like it was a fact.

She looked at him. She wanted to believe him, but just because he looked like Mr. Donovan and was a retired FBI agent, didn't mean he wasn't lying. Or just wrong. Because adults *were* wrong sometimes.

"No," he said, like he understood all that, "you really didn't. We think it was your friend Stephanie."

"*What* was Stephanie?" Mrs. Ledbetter demanded. "What in the name of God is going on?"

Patty was glad Mrs. Ledbetter had asked. It sounded better coming from a teacher.

Mr. Todd and Mr. Villette looked at each other.

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Ledbetter said, and Patty hadn't known she had a voice that sarcastic. "Is this where you tell me it's classified and a matter of national security? Or, 'We could tell you, ma'am, but then we'd have to kill you'?"

"No," Mr. Todd said. "It's not like that."

Mr. Villette had his head bent over his legal pad. He said, "Well, it is, a little bit. I think you can understand it's not something we want all over the media."

"But why..." Mrs. Ledbetter's eyes got wide. "This has happened before. That's why the FBI showed up so goddamn quick. You were *expecting* it."

"No!" Mr. Villette said, like she'd accused him of murder. And in a way, Patty supposed she had.

"If we'd been expecting it, we could have prevented it," Mr. Todd said, more

quietly. "We are not the kind of government conspiracy that kills children. And, no, nothing exactly like this has happened before. But, if we're right, Stephanie Silmer is a manifestation of a phenomenon we've been studying and tracking for almost twenty years. We can't predict it--"

"Yet," Mr. Villette said fiercely.

"Most of the time, we're damage control," Mr. Todd continued. "Because most of the time, the...the people this happens to are adults, and they kill serially. Not en masse."

"Oh my God," Mrs. Ledbetter said weakly.

And something still didn't make sense. "But if Stephanie was the witch," Patty said, "how come she's dead? I mean, my grandmother, it took fifteen rounds for the police to kill her, and nobody was even *shooting* today."

"Well, we don't know yet," Mr. Todd said, "but I can speculate, because we know that people like Stephanie--and it's not witchcraft, Patty. It's more like a disease. A virus. People like Stephanie burn energy very quickly, and particularly when they're just getting sick, they burn it faster than their bodies can replenish it. They need a *lot* of calories."

"Stephanie was really hungry," Patty said.

"Yes. She was...well, we use the word 'converting.' She was converting, and then she attacked Chris Watson and the rest of your class, and that used up even more energy, and my best guess, frankly, is that she starved to death in the space of about fifteen minutes. Maybe less."

Patty's entire insides shrank down into a cold sick lump in the pit of her stomach, and she wanted to scream again, the way she had in the bus, only this time not keeping silent.

"My God!" said Mrs. Ledbetter, shooting up out of her chair. "You have no right to tell a child something like that!"

Mr. Todd leaned back in his chair to look her in the eye. "And what do you suggest I do? Lie to her about her best friend's death? In the long run, that will do far more harm than telling her the truth now, no matter how ugly the truth is."

"It's okay, Mrs. Ledbetter," Patty said, even though it wasn't. It was never going to be okay. But the thing that was wrong wasn't Mr. Todd telling the truth. And he was right. She didn't want to be protected from knowing. "I wanted to know. I mean, I *want* to know. I want to know what happened. I mean, if it's a sickness, how come she got it and I didn't? Did my grandmother have it?"

"We don't know," Mr. Villette said, "although we'll be asking to look at whatever records the police have so that maybe we can find out. But as to why it was Stephanie and not you--we don't have any good answers to that, either. But we may be able to get some better answers if you'll help."

"Me?" said Patty.

"You probably knew her better than anyone," said Mr. Villette. "You'll know things she didn't tell her parents."

"But if she was sick, shouldn't you ask her doctor? She went to Dr. Barber, same as I do."

"Hamstrung by my own metaphor," Mr. Todd muttered, and said more clearly, "It's not that kind of sickness, Patty. It's something that affects the mind before the body. So we need to know about what Stephanie was thinking."

Patty looked helplessly from Mr. Todd to Mr. Villette. She didn't know what they wanted her to say, and saying anything felt like she would be betraying Stephanie, who'd punched Chris Watson in the mouth for calling Patty an ugly weirdo.

"It wasn't Stephanie's fault," Mr. Todd said, in that mind-reading way that was starting to get a little creepy. "We aren't trying to blame her, just to understand what happened to her."

"What kinds of things did she like to do?" Mr. Villette said. "What was she interested in?"

"Um," said Patty. "We watched the *X-Files.* She played catcher on her church softball team, like I do." It was the first thing they'd had in common, back when they were starting to be friends, that they both played catcher. They didn't talk about church, but they played catch and practiced their fielding all the time.

Had played. *Had* practiced.

Patty bit the inside of her cheek to keep from starting to cry again and thought of another thing about Stephanie. "She was really into snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Yeah. When we went to the zoo, she wanted to spend all our time in the reptile house looking at the poisonous snakes."

"Huh. Did she know a lot about them?"

"Yeah," Patty said. She remembered wishing Stephanie knew a little less, especially about snake venom. "She'd read all the books in the school library,

and all the pages she could find on Wikipedia. She made me look at this horrible picture of a kid who'd been bitten by a snake in South America, and his leg was falling off. It was *awful.*"

"What about her parents?" said Mr. Todd.

"Her mom's terrified of snakes," Patty said.

"What do they do?" said Mr. Villette.

"Mr. Silmer lost his job in 2009, and he hasn't really found another one," Patty said. "I don't know what it was exactly, some kind of accounting, because he used to tell accountant jokes all the time, and now he doesn't anymore. And Mrs. Silmer is a physician's assistant."

"Was Stephanie an only child?"

"Yeah." There was a pause. Patty shuffled frantically through her memories, trying to find something more, but Stephanie was just *Stephanie,* and it was silly trying to make her out to be some kind of crazy person. And then she did think of something. "Oh."

"What is it, Patty?" Mr. Villette said, and his weird eyes were kind.

"Well, maybe it's nothing," Patty said.

"You can't hurt anyone by telling us," Mr. Villette said.

"Well, Stephanie... I told her about my Grandmother Whittaker because I was afraid I was a witch, and she was really interested. Wanted to see Daddy's scrapbook and everything. And, I mean, if she...if Grandmother Whittaker had this sickness you're talking about, and Stephanie got it..." She got the rest out in a lump: "Could she have got it by thinking about Grandmother Whittaker too much?"

Mr. Villette looked at Mr. Todd, and Mr. Todd looked back. "Mythology," Mr. Villette said softly, and Patty didn't understand what he meant, but the look on his face made her cold.

"That's a good idea, Patty," Mr. Todd said. "That is, no, just thinking about your grandmother wouldn't have made her get this virus, but it could have affected her, well, her symptoms, I guess you'd say."

"So she looked at people and they fell down dead, just like with my grandmother."

"Maybe," said Mr. Villette, and Patty was going to ask him what he meant when there was a noise out in the main part of the police station that was yelling and crashing all mixed together.

They all jumped. Patty knocked her Coke over, and then everything was crazy for a second while Mr. Todd grabbed for his tape recorder, and Mrs. Ledbetter nearly fell over trying to keep from getting Coke on her clothes, and Patty and Mr. Villette both grabbed for the Coke can and ended up knocking Mr. Villette's legal pad on the floor.

"Sorry!" Patty said. "Sorry!" She crawled under the table after it and saw as she turned it right side up and tried to straighten the crumpled pages that all the time they'd been talking, Mr. Villette had been working on his map.

He'd been drawing in the dead bodies, with neat shaded lines connecting them to the circles he'd marked with Patty's help, so that for some of them it really looked like the circle was the top of the head, if you were looking straight down at a person standing upright, and the dead body was the shadow. And others, like Olivia--she'd gotten almost all the way to the parking lot before she died.

"Oh God," Patty said, backing away from the legal pad as if it was on fire, crawling at first, and then standing up as soon as she was out from under the table.

"Patty?" said Mrs. Ledbetter. "Honey, what--"

"I'm sorry, I gotta--" She turned and dove for the door, clawing it open and half falling across the hallway to the women's restroom. She heard someone yell her name from the front of the building, but she couldn't even look around, all her attention focused tightly inward on not puking before she made it to a toilet. Not in front of Mrs. Ledbetter and the FBI agents and the whole Bell Creek police station.

She made it, just barely.

Act VI

The Knoxville Zoological Gardens
Knoxville, TN, May 2011

The reptile house at the Knoxville Zoo was dim and humid and creepy as all get-out. Patty had kind of liked the king snake the zookeeper had brought out and let everybody touch, even though Kelly and Olivia and Madison Petrie had been all stupid and shrieking and giggling about it. But it hadn't been slimy or rough, just dry and bumpy-smooth and moving endlessly beneath her fingers, and it hadn't seemed to mind being petted. That had been cool. But then Stephanie started asking questions, and she kept asking questions, even when everybody else had gotten bored and gone somewhere else, and Patty had to stay, because she was Stephanie's designated buddy, and she'd get them both in trouble if she left.

Stephanie was trying to persuade the zookeeper to show her how they milked the rattlesnakes for venom, and the zookeeper was kind of laughing, but there was no way he was going to let a nine-year-old girl near a rattlesnake, and Patty knew it even if Stephanie didn't.

"Come on, Stephanie," she said, interrupting Stephanie in the middle of something about hemotoxins and blood clotting that Patty didn't even want to know. "Let's go look at the red pandas."

The door opened, letting in another bunch of fourth graders, and the zookeeper looked glad to see them.

Stephanie gave Patty a disgusted look. "Yeah, let's go be *girly* and look at something *cute.*"

"Well, okay," Patty said peaceably, "we can go look at the rhinos if you want. Just, enough with the snakes, okay?"

Stephanie glowered for a second, but she could never stay mad for long. "Okay," she said. "This place giving you the willies?"

"A little," Patty said. It was okay to admit it to Stephanie, now that they were moving. And Patty had touched the king snake, which she knew made Stephanie approve of her.

"Wouldn't you like to be able to bite anybody that made you mad?" Stephanie said, pushing the door open.

"It's called being a brat," Patty said, and came gladly out of the reptile house and into the sunlight. "And Mom said she'd spank Jeremy if he ever did it again."

"That's my point," said Stephanie. "It's not being a brat when you're a snake."

"And you want to go around biting people all the time?" Patty said.

"Not *all* the time. Just sometimes. You know."

"Yeah," Patty said, because she did, and Stephanie grinned at her.

And then Stephanie said, "Ooh! Lookit the fox!" and broke into a run. And by the time Patty caught up with her, they'd both forgotten about snakes.

Act VII

Bell Creek, TN, November 2011

No one came after Patty into the restroom, which was a relief, but it was weird, too, when Patty could think about it. Teachers *never* left you alone if

they thought you were sick.

She flushed the toilet and washed her hands. Her reflection in the mirror looked awful, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. She splashed cold water on her face; it felt good, even if it didn't make her any less red or puffy.

And still no adult had come after her. She was already afraid when she opened the door again, and her father's voice echoing down the hall wasn't a surprise, just the confirmation of a horrible truth.

"I know that child is a witch," Daddy was saying. "Just like her mother and her grandmother before her."

Patty froze.

"And I'm telling you," Daddy continued, his voice rising into a shout, "I'm not having a witch in my house! I have a little boy!"

"You have a daughter," Mr. Todd said, and Patty hadn't imagined he could sound so stern.

"We know the government's hunting witches," Daddy said. "You can take her away. Tonight. I'll sign any papers you want."

"Mr. MacIntyre," Mr. Villette said, "we don't want to take your daughter away from you. There's no reason to. She's not a witch."

"That's what the government always says. I know about Roswell, too."

"*Roswell?*" said Mr. Villette, but he broke off sharply.

"Mr. MacIntyre," Mr. Todd said. "Your daughter is no danger to your son. Or to anyone else."

"Tell that to the Watsons," Daddy said. "Or the Pattersons."

She couldn't stand frozen in the hallway of the Bell Creek police station forever, no matter how much she wanted to. Slowly, lifting one lead-weight foot at a time, Patty started toward the front of the building.

"Patty hasn't hurt anyone," Mr. Villette said.

"Then how come she's the only one left alive?" Daddy said. "How come, out of a class of twenty-two kids, this girl you say isn't a witch is the *only one left?*"

It was a really good question, and she could hear that in Mr. Todd's voice when he said, "We aren't entirely sure yet, Mr. MacIntyre. But we know it isn't because Patty killed them."

They weren't telling Daddy about Stephanie, and Patty realized, as she came out of the hallway, that she couldn't blame them. They had to know that anything they told Daddy about witches, the whole county would know in a week's time.

"There you are," Daddy said. "Witch."

"Mr. MacIntyre, your daughter is not a witch!" Mr. Villette sounded angry.

But Daddy didn't even look at him when he said, "How can you be sure?" He was looking at Patty, and she felt like she'd never seen him before, like this man looking at her all cold and hateful was some stranger. Had to be. Those flat brown eyes and that turned-down, ugly mouth, those couldn't belong to her daddy.

"Patty," Mr. Todd said, starting toward her in a hurry, "why don't you go back and wait with Mrs Led--"

"We don't want you in our house," Daddy said over Mr. Todd. "Your mother--" He stopped and corrected himself. "My wife and I have talked about this. If we couldn't keep the evil from showing in you, we weren't going to let you poison Jeremy."

"I wouldn't!" Patty said.

"That's what your mother said," Daddy said. "And she died to prove it, too."

"She had an aneurysm!" Patty yelled. "I read her obituary in the library! She had an *aneurysm* and it killed her and you shouldn't be *glad* about it!"

"Patty," Mr. Todd said gently, trying to get her to turn around without actually touching her, like he was afraid she'd take a swing at him.

"We won't have you in our house!" Daddy shouted.

"I wouldn't go there if you asked me!" Patty shouted back. "Not if you got down on your bended knees and begged!" And then she was crying again, which was stupid, and also it hurt, because her eyes were already raw and her throat and chest hurt from all the crying she'd been doing over Stephanie and everybody else, and it wasn't fair of Daddy to make her start crying again.

She let Mr. Todd herd her back to the room where Mrs. Ledbetter was waiting. The adults talked for a moment over Patty's head, and Patty let them, because sometimes it was okay to be a kid. She managed to stop crying, finally, and heard Mrs. Ledbetter say, "Jerry MacIntyre never has had the sense God gave a goose." And it was horrible that somebody was saying that about her daddy, but it made her feel better, too.

"Come and sit down, Patty," Mrs. Ledbetter said as Mr. Todd left again. "Do

you want another Coke?"

"No, thank you," Patty said. She swallowed hard. "Mrs. Ledbetter, what's going to happen to me? If the FBI don't want me, and Daddy says he won't--" She stopped and pinched the bridge of her nose, because this was seriously enough crying already.

"Do you have any other family?" Mrs. Ledbetter said. "Is there somebody we could call, maybe?"

Cousin Lewis was Patty's first, horrible thought. Then Grandma Karen--but she wasn't really Patty's grandmother, even though Patty loved her. But that made her remember Aunt Lee. "My mama's sister lives in Knoxville, I think," she said. "I don't know her. But maybe...do you think maybe she'd let me stay with her?"

"Mr. Villette is calling Children's Services," Mr. Todd said, coming back in the room. "But we can have them call your aunt, too. What's her name?"

"Lee," Patty said. "Lee Whittaker."

"Good," said Mr. Todd, making a note of it. "Don't worry, Patty. You're not going to be abandoned."

Except that's what Daddy just did, Patty thought, but Mr. Todd was already out of the room again, and she knew better than to argue with adults anyway.

She and Mrs. Ledbetter sat at the table and didn't say anything to each other until the door opened again, and Mr. Todd showed in a young woman with bright new-penny-colored hair who said she was Angela Gorham and she'd be Patty's caseworker and Patty could call her Angie.

She was another Yankee, and Patty'd never called an adult by their first name in her life. But she had a nice smile.

"Patty, are you going to be okay?" Mrs. Ledbetter said. "Only, I need to get going."

Patty nodded. "I'll be fine, Mrs. Ledbetter. Thanks for staying."

Mrs. Ledbetter looked at her for a moment. Then her mouth got grim and she said, "Don't let your daddy's nonsense poison you, Patty. You're not a witch." And she left, nodding thanks to Mr. Todd for holding the door for her.

Patty looked back at Miss Gorham just in time to see her mouthing the word "witch" at Mr. Todd with question marks all over her face. Mr. Todd didn't turn a hair, just said, "Patty, I need to talk to Miss Gorham for a moment before we leave. And I think Mr. Villette would like to talk to you."

"Okay," Patty said, and she got up and went into the hall where Mr. Villette

was waiting.

"Patty," said Mr. Villette, crouching down so he could look at her, "you're in for a rough time, and there's nothing I can say that will make it easier. But there's one thing you should remember when you think about Stephanie."

"I know," Patty said. "It wasn't her fault."

"Not that," Mr. Villette said, "although you're right, it wasn't. But listen. Christopher Watson's eyes started bleeding, and you ran, right?"

"Right."

"You saw my map--" And he screwed up his face in what she guessed was an apology. "So you know how big her radius of effect was."

"Her what?"

"The distance she could kill people at."

"Yeah." Patty remembered Olivia Schroeder, who'd almost made it to the parking lot.

"So here's the thing. Stephanie could have killed you, too." He watched her anxiously as he continued: "She'd converted before you started to run, because she made Christopher Watson's eyes bleed. She could have killed you, *and she didn't.*"

"Oh," Patty said. She thought about that, and he waited, still watching her. "Why didn't she? She killed everybody else, even people like Jessie Norris who never picked on us at all."

"We'll never know for sure," Mr. Villette said. "We don't know whether she could aim it, or whether once it started, she couldn't really control it. But either way, she held it off of you, Patty. And we know, from other people like Stephanie that we've been able to talk to, that that must have been very hard. Stephanie loved you. And I don't want you to forget that."

The word "love" was embarrassing, like Mr. Villette thought she and Stephanie really were lesbians or something. But she looked at him, still watching her and still looking anxious, and she knew that wasn't what he meant. That wasn't what he meant at all.

"Thanks," she said.

He nodded, and for a second he looked almost shy. "This is my card," he said, and handed her a business card. She took it, but she couldn't look away from him to read it, even though no one had ever given her their business card before. "If you need somebody to talk to, you can call me or e-mail me, okay?"

"Isn't that weird?" Patty said.

He grinned. "A little. But it's better than not having anybody. And I know about people like Stephanie. You may have questions, once you have a chance to think. And I don't want... I can't--we can't stay here, but we *aren't* abandoning you." He was really fierce about it, like it mattered to him, and that made Patty feel better.

"Thank you," she said. "I think Miss Gorham will be okay. And maybe my Aunt Lee will come."

"I hope so," he said.

There was a pause where Patty knew she should be saying something that would let him feel like he was off the hook, but she didn't know what.

He said, "Do you think you're going to be all right?"

"I don't know," Patty said. "I'm going to try."

"Me, too," said Mr. Villette, and then he stood up and put his adult face back on as the door opened. Mr. Todd came out, and Miss Gorham stood in the doorway.

But Patty still had his business card, and she held onto it tight as Miss Gorham said, "Come in here, Patty. We've got a lot to talk about."

She wasn't a witch. Stephanie was dead, and her daddy didn't want her in his house, but she wasn't a witch.

There was hope.

Halfway Home

At the edge of Tennessee, November 2011

They were halfway home when Sol couldn't take it anymore.

"You're awfully quiet over there, Grasshopper," he said, and from the corner of his eye, he saw Chaz twitch.

"Just thinking about that little girl," Chaz said vaguely.

Deflection. Sol countered: "Which one? Patty or Stephanie?"

"Both, I guess," Chaz said. Ambiguity. But just before Sol set himself for another try--he had a momentary ridiculous image of the two of them as jousting knights--Chaz said, "Patty, mostly. I'm trying to get my head around having your parents tell you you're going to grow up to be evil."

"Mr. MacIntyre is a piece of work," Sol agreed.

Chaz shook his head, like a horse trying to shake off a biting fly. "My mom never--" He stopped, tried again. "She never made me feel like a freak, even though..."

Sol held his breath and tried to remember to keep his eyes on the goddamn road.

Chaz said, "I remember breast-feeding, you know? I remember the taste and her arm supporting my whole body and how I didn't understand the words she was singing. Not yet. I was twenty before I figured out that wasn't normal. Because my mom...everything I threw at her, and God there must have been some crazy shit, she just smiled and loved me and it was part of our world. Hers and mine. And I guess I thought... I mean, I know people abuse their kids and do horrible fucking things to them--I've always known that. But somehow I still thought my mom was... That that's what real parents did."

"It is," Sol said carefully. "But sometimes it seems like there aren't many real parents in the world."

"Yeah," Chaz said and rubbed his face tiredly. "Sometimes it does."

Location

Ashton, VA, February 2012

At first, visitors arrived or didn't arrive based on some set of parameters that nobody explained to her. Someone--probably Ramachandran--would make the call, and either let people in to see the monster or tell them, sorry, the exhibit's closed. She just ate a keeper, but we think she's still hungry.

Then they started asking her, did she want to see anyone today? She got pissy the first few times, which wasn't as good a cover for fear as she would have thought. She'd said, "I'm delusional and psychopathic, how should I know?"

She knew it was part of her treatment, her re-education. The Bug told her to refuse to cooperate. But if she did, she'd be turning down even that lousy scrap of self-determination.

Since then she'd gotten pretty good at checking her mental state for nasty surprises and saying yes or no to visitors based on what she found. She could tell a good day from a bad day, and a bad day she could wrestle into some sort of submission from one destined to kick her ass.

Ramachandran and the rest called it progress. Hafidha called it being hyper-aware of her own repulsive fail.

Today was a bad day, of the sort she thought she could wrestle. So when the orderly said Chaz was there asking for her, and did she want to see him, she tightened the straps on the Bug's straitjacket and pretended it was just what she wanted.

Chaz settled into her plastic chair as if he didn't want to wake it up. He carried a manila folder--not an official one, just the office-supply kind. He set it on his lap, squared off with his thigh bones, before he met her eyes and did The Face: eyebrows raised, eyes round, lips pressed together with the corners trying to reach his jaw hinges on either side. The not-smile, the one that said, "You okay?" and "I'm okay" and "This is so not okay," all at once.

Fuck, he's freaky-looking. He's not half as smart as he thinks he is, or he wouldn't do that.

Shut up, Bug. You don't know shit. For now, it listened to her.

He looked tired, and even less brown than usual for wintertime. She was pretty sure it was still winter. She decided not to ask the date; that was the sort of thing that made him hurt, and with the Bug kicked into its corner, she didn't *have* to hurt him.

"Hey," she said. "This is totally unexpected."

"Hey." Some actual smile, before he looked down. "There's...this idea. If you hate it, we'll think of something else. Nobody's feelings will be hurt or anything."

"Aww. Bummer."

Chaz looked into her eyes again, in that way that could sometimes make the Bug back down. *My little brother has squashed worse than you under his shoe and not noticed*, she told it. What kinds of things *did* the Bug whisper to Chaz when his life hit the low end of the waveform? Hell, maybe Chaz's nightmares were about running out of orange juice. Maybe he had it easy.

Once they would have talked about it. That was before she went and wrecked it all.

"Okay," she said. "Got the terms. What's the idea?"

"You could move in with me."

Her insides tumbled like rocks under a big wave. She could get out. She could take a handout. He was the only person who could get a collar and leash on the Bug. She'd be leashed, and he'd hold the other end. She trusted him. She hated him more than anybody, ever.

Privacy--well, she didn't have any here, either. More illusion of it, though.

In his damned speaking face, she saw how much of that he understood, which was all of it. Bastard.

She laughed. It sounded brittle and ugly, even to her. "What, and sleep on your couch? Your place is slightly bigger than a refrigerator box."

He opened the manila folder. One by one, he took out printouts of photos and laid them on the plastic desk. Living room, kitchen, dining area, bathroom, bedroom, second bedroom, second bathroom. No furniture, wood floors, creamy walls, windows windows windows. Tree branches just starting to show buds outside some of them. It was like showing a pony to a six-year-old. "What is this?"

"It's a condo. It's mine."

She looked from the last photo to his face. He looked tired, and bad-thin. *Oh, Smarty-boy*, she thought, while the Bug purred and licked up the tears that might otherwise have made it to her eyes. "Roulette?"

He nodded.

He hated roulette. Roulette was just physics, not like poker, which was a puzzle and a game. Roulette, he'd said once, was like robbing banks without the illegal.

"How long did it take?"

"Three days."

He must have slammed neurons in every casino in Vegas to make that much in three days. "Get yourself banned?"

He lifted his boney shoulders and let them fall. "If I stay away for a while, I think I'm okay. Like a year. Or two." His mouth wrinkled, a sour smile.

She swallowed down the ache in her throat that made the Bug happy. She found herself running scenarios, looking for the hitch, for the trap, for the way around the trap, for a way to use it against the trappers. Because she wanted to use this. She *wanted* this.

Wanting was a weakness. It was like love that way.

Chaz's hands twitched over his knees, lifted, flopped into his lap again. "It's not-- You won't be--"

She knew what he was trying not to say. "Free," she said as if the word weighed ten pounds. "What're we talking? Guards? Video surveillance? High-voltage doorknobs? Has Mr. Fantastic built me a force field?"

His face hardened. Oh, yes, her little brother could get pretty steely when he had to. If she wasn't going to play nice, he wasn't going to feel sorry for her. Good for him.

"You'll have to wear an ankle bracelet, or something like it. And yeah, you can probably hack one of those. If you do..." Somehow the tilt of his head encompassed her shiny cell, and suggested nobody would be in a hurry to dismantle it.

Her nails were short, but she pressed them as hard as she could into her palms to feel the sting. She counted seconds for her inhale and exhale, and made them even. "Can I think about it?"

She was crazy, not stupid. He knew what was in this contract. He'd signed it, figuratively speaking, or he'd never have offered it to her. She had to thread her way past the bad things in her head before she could tell if she could give him her word and have a chance of keeping it.

"Take your time. No expiration date on the coupon. Do you want the photos?"

God, like the stuffed rabbit at the dog track; pretty pictures to run after. She almost said no. But the dogs never got to catch the rabbit. The photos weren't bait; they were a promise. He was like that.

"Yes, please."

He tucked them back in the folder and settled it on the edge of the desk. Then he stood up and caught her guard's eye.

"You'll come back next week?" The plea in her voice made her gorge rise. *A little self-respect, please,* the Bug snarled.

"Anytime you want." He bookended the visit with The Face, as he always did.

When he was gone, the folder still lay on the white plastic desktop. It was proof that he'd really offered. Unless the photos weren't in there, had never been in there. Unless she'd imagined it all, because she wanted so, so much to-- Because she wanted, that was all.

She was afraid to open the folder, and she wasn't sure what scared her more: that the photos wouldn't be there, or that they would. The Buddha was a smart cookie with that non-attachment shit. A shame she was never going to master it.

Jesus, maybe if she agreed to this, Chaz would stop doing that freaky thing with his mouth.

4.04 "Latency" - by Elizabeth Bear

"...there is no God. Nature sufficeth unto herself; in no wise hath she need of an author..."

--Donatien Alphonse François, marquis de Sade, *Justine*

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

New Richmond, WI, February 2012

Barry Petrewski lived in a hole in the ground. It was a fairly nice hole, as such things go, with many books, comfortable furniture, and a good kitchen--by Russian standards, a *very* good kitchen.

An American would have thought it ripe for replacement.

A house stood over Barry's hole, but it was just camouflage for the neighbors who would have thought it odd if Barry lived in a hole without a house over it. Not that the neighbors were close by. Barry's camouflage rose from a sweep of rolling countryside, tangled unworked fields and rows of battered windbreak trees. A tan van with a green plumber's logo occupied the cracked driveway. The bright chrome of its bumpers was pitted with rust, but the engine ran perfectly.

Once upon a time the hole had been a bomb shelter, but the Cold War was as dead as the Soviet Union, as dead as the automaton doctors who had made Barry an automaton too. The irony amused him--how wonderful that he should escape from the Russian automatons and come to rest in a shelter designed to protect people from the excesses of Kruschchev. Now it was Barry's shelter: a place to keep him safe.

Him, and all his pretty ladies, while he experimented and learned to make more automatons.

Now it was time to let one of the ladies go. Barry was sad about that, but excited also, because it meant soon he would get to start looking for a new one.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington D.C.

Hafidha Gates had a hole in her brain.

She tried not to think about that. It was counterproductive, and so she occupied herself with other things. Just now she was working late. Reveling, in fact, in the opportunity to work late. To *work*. To do something useful and relevant and powerful with her time. To maybe save a goddamned life or two. On her own schedule. Under her own power.

It was a sad kind of freedom. She could come here, to the Hoover Building. She could go home, to Arlington. There were a limited number of stops in between she was allowed to make, for food and exercise.

They didn't bother with a monitor anklet. It wasn't like anything electronic could chain this Prometheus, and small humiliations just gave the Bug that much more ammunition. But waiting at home for her was one Chaz Villette, with permission to read her mind...

...and not disappointing him was the strongest chain anyone could have placed on her. Stronger even than the pulses generated by the electrodes penetrating her skull, beneath scars hidden now by half-inch coils of hair she was still deciding what to do with. *It's like a chance to start all over.*

She'd call Chaz before she left. He'd have dinner ready when she walked in the door. Playing house, that was all it was... *No. Bug, you don't get an opinion*. He'd have dinner ready. And she could have some, as much as she wanted, off a real plate with real flatware--just as soon as she finished going over these Midwestern unsolved murders, hoping again that a pattern would emerge.

A pattern didn't... but Lisa Marshall from Down The Hall did. She poked her head in the door of Hafidha's Sanctum and cleared her throat. Hafidha had already caught the motion in her bicycle mirror.

"Hey, Hafs--"

Hafidha wondered who in Lisa's family was the schizophrenic, or if it was some other fairly dramatic and stigmatized disability. Whatever the source, Lisa was the only member of the BAU team who'd managed neither to flinch at all nor to be inobviously restraining herself from flinching when Hafs came back to work.

"I'm all ears." Hafidha spun her chair around and leaned it back for a better angle up at Lisa.

Lisa's broad cheeks wrinkled with her grin, but it fell away quickly. "Got something I think might be one of yours."

She held out a file folder.

Gingerly, Hafidha took it. There was never any telling what the contents of one of these things was, and paper copies were so damned slow. You actually had to look at the horrible photos instead of just assimilating them. The scene photos and descriptions hadn't used to bother her, but the Bug enjoyed them. Paper was slower, and so the Bug liked it more.

This didn't take long. The photos weren't so bad, until she got to the last one. And then she looked up. "Shit." She flipped the photo, her eyes on Lisa's face. "She's *alive*?"

"Alive," said Lisa. "Missing three years of her life. And, apparently--also missing a baby." She paused. "The investigating detective is a Saul Zingermann. Homicide guy? He knew about the--" her windmilling gesture took in the WTF, in all its seedy bureaucratic glory.

Hafidha, as it happened, knew about Saul Zingermann.

"I'll call Reyes," Hafidha said.

Woodbridge, VA

A twangy guitar pulled Danny out of the warmth of sleep and Gray's arm snugged tight around his middle. Behind the darkness of the bedroom blackout curtains, he couldn't tell if it was night or morning, but a squint at the clock said 11:15 pm. He'd barely been down a half hour--

"Shit!" he said, as it sunk in that the tune the Austin guitar was playing was Junior Brown's "My Wife Thinks You're Dead," and that it was coming from his phone. Hafidha wouldn't be calling this late out of idle companionship. Hell, he wasn't sure yet that he was comfortable with her calling at all--but he was a good enough actor not to let her see his unease.

Gray stirred as Brady lunged for the phone. "Hafs?"

"We've got a live one in Minneapolis," Hafidha said. "I've already run it past Reyes, and he said call in the troops. So I'm calling. But I can't raise Chaz--"

"Not answering his phone?"

"He's supposed to be home waiting for me to call," she said.

Her voice vibrated with strain. Brady wondered how good of an actor *she* was. She might be out, she might be managed--but he could never allow himself to forget that a monster lived inside of her now. There were some times when he still wondered...

It could be a trap.

It could be. And it could be genuine worry and need. "It's out of my way," he said. "I'll be late in."

"Dad won't run the briefing without both of you. Thank you, Danny."

"No problem. See you when I get there." He thumbed the red symbol and heaved his feet to the floor before he could think too much about it. He'd call Reyes and double check before he left. He trusted Hafidha. He just didn't trust the Bug.

"Work?" Gray asked, sliding a hand down Brady's side.

Brady grunted unhappily.

"Go." Gray pulled the covers up--and incidentally, away from Danny, who shivered as cold air stroked his skin. "Love ya."

"I love you," Danny said in reply. He ran a hand over Gray's dark hair to reinforce it. Just in case.

You never knew.

*

Arlington, VA

Chaz wasn't answering his phone, and Reyes was already walking in through the parking lot of the Hoover Building when Brady called him. That didn't stop Brady from parking his car in front of the wrong condo and walking across a square of winter-brown grass to reach Chaz and Hafidha's windows before he went to the door. You couldn't be too careful.

He peered through half-drawn curtains to see a cozy living room with a gas fire and one lamp burning, a tablet computer face-down on the sofa beside it. More lights burned down a hallway behind the stairs. Faintly, Brady heard music--the White Stripes--and the clatter of pots. He caught a glimpse of Chaz's coathanger shoulders and bent elbows as Villette moonwalked across the gap, his left hand protected by a pot holder where it clutched a saucepan handle.

Chaz's head came up as soon as Brady's gaze touched him. He turned to the window and nodded, though Brady would have bet his face was hidden by reflections from the better-lit inside. It was still creepy, even though it was Chaz.

A moment later and the music had dropped, and Chaz was at the door, rolling cuffs down over his wrists as he held the door open with an elbow. Chaz's shirt was white flannel, with thin red lines forming squares through the warp and weft of the fabric. It looked like an empty tic-tac-toe grid multiplied about

a thousand times.

"Come in."

Brady stepped inside on a gust of spring chill and shut the door behind him. As soon as the latch clicked, Chaz said, "Hafidha?" with a worried crease down his brow.

"She sent me," Brady said. "We've got a go. You drop your phone in the john?"

Chaz's eyes widened. "Shit," he said, pushing a lock of hair curled and frizzed by cooking steam out of his eyes. "I left it plugged in in the bedroom--"

Brady said, "No foul. Grab your bag and I'll drive you."

"I've got to change," said Chaz, brushing ineffectually at a soup splatter on his front. "Come upstairs. You can brief me while I get a clean shirt."

Danny snorted. "Tell me that wasn't a come-on."

"Brady!" Chaz was already halfway up the stairs. "That's sexual harassment."

"Only because you need a promotion," Danny said. The stairs didn't creak under his weight. *Nice place.*

When he turned to the bedrooms, it was obvious which one was Chaz's. Towards the front of the house, and the door stood open. The walls were still eggshell white, and Hafidha wouldn't have stood for that in her own room for longer than it took to choose new colors. The fact that the downstairs walls were already fresh, sandy shades of rose and plum and gold confirmed his analysis.

Chaz stood by a pile of clothes on the bed, stripped to the waist. The scars beside his shoulder blades had faded to matching yellow-white slices; Brady bit his lip as he remembered long, liver-colored gashes, the gleam of bone at the bottom. A moment passed before he realized the salient point here: *He's not hiding the scars anymore.*

Chaz raised his arms, sliding a silk thermal undershirt over his head. The neck snagged on his hair; as he tugged, the angled ranks of muscles below his ribcage tensed. *So that's what three percent body fat looks like.*

At least the kid had muscle now.

He tucked the shirt into the waistband of his jeans and followed it with another base layer. This one was Smartwool; the one atop that was polypro. Then a turtleneck and a blazer. He kicked off shearling slippers and ducked under his bed for shoes. He was already wearing wool socks.

"Kitting up for Everest?"

Chaz snorted as he backed out from under the bed. "Whatever I gained, it doesn't keep me warm."

"Grab another layer," Brady said. "We're going to Minnesota."

*

Hafidha turned her head and glanced the length of the rectangular table. There was Chaz and Brady behind the table and Falkner standing alongside the door. Reyes in his usual spot at the head, and Sol and Nikki across from the boys. With Hafidha standing beside the whiteboard, they all fit now--even with Sol present--and she hated that as much as the Bug loved it. Her hand tightened on the dry-erase marker in her hand--one she had no intention of using--and she frowned at Reyes.

"Go ahead," he said.

Hafidha reached out with her mind--it felt good, so simple and clean--and flipped a photograph of a dark-haired white woman up on the screen. "Bethany Keene," she said. "Age 26, flight attendant, based out of Tampa. Or she was, until she disappeared out of a Minneapolis hotel three years ago, without a trace."

"Security cameras?" Lau asked.

"Showed her entering the building," Hafidha said. "And leaving the elevator to go to her room. And then nothing. No sign she'd ever left. But she was gone. Until three days ago."

The next photo. Hafidha avoided looking at it with her eyes--she'd already seen the copy in Doctor Lisa's folder--but it was just as easy for her to read the ones and zeros and know exactly what the image was. The same young woman, but wizened, glassy. With dry, frizzy hair, her olive complexion faded to a horrible greenish color--but not dead. Sitting up in an institutional bed, hunched forward in a hospital gown, her shoulders up to protect her throat.

"She was dumped outside a Minneapolis hospital emergency room. She was hemorrhaging from childbirth."

"*Childbirth*?" Lau rocked forward; a lesser agent would have been half out of her seat.

Sol swallowed and steepled his fingers. "Much as I hate to say this, it wouldn't be the first time a serial rapist kept a... dungeon. Or even forced women to conceive and give birth."

Lau folded her fingers around each other. "True. But what makes it one of ours?"

Hafidha looked at Reyes.

Reyes nodded and spoke. "Do you folks remember Detective Zingermann? The Tom and Betty Johnson case?"

Brady's shoulders rose like those of the young woman in the photo. "Do I ever."

"Good cop," said Falkner.

Reyes continued, "He'd been working her disappearance as a possible homicide. When Bethany Keene turned up alive, he was notified because he'd flagged her name at every E.R. and morgue in the Twin Cities. And once he got a chance to talk to her, he called us. Or rather, he called the BAU, and asked them to pass it down the hall. Bethany can't remember the last three years."

"Traumatic amnesia? Was she drugged?"

"My first thought too, Villette. And the hospital reports--of all things--traces of Phenazepam in her blood."

"That's not one of your standard date rape drugs," Brady said.

Chaz got one of his faraway expressions. Hafidha knew he was thinking--as she was--of Daphne. Of how Daphne would have been ready with chapter and verse of the pharmaceutical, ripped from the pages of the *Physician's Desk Reference*.

"It's an epilepsy drug," he said at last, slowly. "But not a common one, is it?"

"Not in the west," Hafidha said. "But they used a lot of it in Russia. And it can have side-effects on recollection, according to the doctors Zingermann talked to. Still, it wouldn't just obliterate this woman's memory of an entire pregnancy. "

"So he called us?" Brady asked.

"No," Hafidha said. "He called us because he said he got the impression that there was somebody else in Bethany's head with her. Sort of like, he said... sort of like how he felt when he was talking to Betty Johnson."

"Right," said Reyes. "Lau, I'm going to stick you with the scutwork, but you're the best for the job. See if you can get Tan seconded, and try to set up interviews with Keene's family and coworkers in Florida. The geography and timeline make me think it's probably a wild goose chase, but it's possible that this was personal, and somebody tried to make her look like a target of

opportunity by taking her while she was in another city. Everybody else--wheels up in an hour. Except Hafs." His gaze rested on her with a physical weight. "You have the con."

"Reyes--"

He paused, regarded her out of coffee-brown eyes. Hafidha realized it was her voice that had spoken. She scrambled to make it seem like she hadn't been protesting being left behind. "I'll start with security films from the hotel, if Zingermann can have them shipped to me."

"Good idea," Reyes said.

*

New Richmond, WI

The new girl was so pretty. Before Barry unpacked her, he paused to admire the clean lines of her limbs, the way her hair fell across her shoulders and her face. She didn't move--usually by the time he unzipped them they were stirring a little--and the left hand reached under her nose to feel for breath. He would have slapped it back, but he was curious, too.

The left fingers curled. Barry saw disturbed hair flutter as if in a gentle breeze. Alive, then, and he snatched the left hand back before it could do more than give her cheek a gentle caress, brushing her hair away from her eyes.

He had to get her into her kennel before the drug wore off.

Act II

Somewhere over Virginia

On the plane, when they'd all retreated to their corners, Chaz slipped up beside Reyes and crouched in the aisle beside his chair. He spoke softly, angling his face so his hair hid him. "If he's a gamma and he's raping them to make them pregnant...you know what he's breeding. If any of them live--"

There was a pause. Their gazes met as Reyes turned, inclined his head.

"I know," Reyes said. He pushed a hand across thinning coils of hair, fingers flexing as if he resisted the urge to scratch. "Believe me. I've thought of it."

*

New Richmond, WI

Barry needed both hands to support the new girl down the hall. The first few times, he'd had to drag a girl, hurting her until the left hand cooperated. The left hand was weak. Sentimental. Evil and pathetic and not at all a proper

automaton. It shook as he hauled the new girl past the two kennels that were still full. The girls inside withdrew to their beds as he went past. They knew better than to come up to the wire when he was bringing someone new in, no matter how much they wanted to.

He put the new girl in the third kennel and cut her ropes with a sheath knife he wore at his belt, careful to take both the blade and the rope pieces with him. The door stood open, and the concrete floor still smelled faintly of bleach. He'd made it very clean for her. She wouldn't get sick on him. He made sure her bubbler was connected and running, and that she couldn't reach anything but the welded, rounded parts she couldn't pull loose or hurt herself on.

He locked the door behind himself when he left.

He'd made mistakes with some of the early girls. He was very careful not to make the same mistake twice. His program allowed him to learn.

As he walked past the kennels on the way out, the left hand reached out to fondle the wire of the kennels as if comforting a sobbing child.

*

Minneapolis, MN

Chaz recognized Saul Zingermann waiting behind a line of barriers and orange cones on the tarmac before the plane rolled to a halt. The Minneapolis detective was a bulky shadow in a parka, backlit by floods, but no amount of weatherproofing could hide his awkward stance and the characteristic tilt of his head. He started forward as the stairs rolled up, and by the time the team was descending he awaited them at the bottom.

"Sure glad you came," he said, shaking hands all around. Chaz stood at the back of the group, shoulders hunched and hands shoved into his pockets. He knew he was shivering visibly; it was a good excuse.

Zingermann continued, "I heard about Agent Worth. I am--" He shook his head and finished helplessly. "She was a good cop. I'm sure I'm not half so sorry as you are."

"Thank you," Falkner said. "There's enough sorrow to go around."

Under the knit cap and the hood of the parka, Zingermann was medium-tall, spare, with smooth cheeks and a nose like Jean Reno's. Elizabeth Johnson had called him "funny-looking in a handsome sort of way," which Chaz supposed was the racist old bat's code for "Jewish." Chaz would have said he had a nice face, unassuming, that promised to grow craggy and weather well with age. It was a face you could trust; a face that encouraged you to confidences.

He was a damned good interviewer.

"Saul," Todd said as Zingermann's hand reached his.

"Sol," Zingermann answered, with a flicker of grin. "Let's get inside before our eyelashes freeze together."

The car waiting for them was a police 4x4, three rows of seats making room enough for everybody in the truncated team. Brady got shotgun in deference to his shoulders, while Chaz crunched himself up in the back row next to Todd. Falkner and Reyes rode in the middle.

"I got your message," Zingermann said, turning over his shoulder to Reyes briefly before starting up the engine. It was still warm, and a little bit of heat even filtered back to Chaz. "I've held off informing the family. You said Agent Lau was enroute?"

"We'll do it in person," Reyes confirmed. "It might be revealing."

Zingermann nodded. "If anybody can get something useful out of them, it's Nikki," he said.

Chaz didn't miss the admiration in his voice. *Wonder Woman powers, activate.*

"I sure didn't have much luck. It might be there's nothing useful to get." From another cop, it could have been a self-justification. From Zingermann, it was a wry acknowledgement that their job had a lot of dead ends.

"I'm assuming you'll want to go straight to the hospital?"

"Please," Reyes said. "We can get settled in once we've met Ms. Keene."

"I have identified three other possibly linked cases."

Chaz leaned between Falkner and Reyes so he could snake a hand forward. "Files go here."

*

Sol held the flashlight while Chaz bent over papers and photographs, rapidly developing a headache and a case of nausea from reading in the dark, in a moving car. The files were dusty and smelled of long storage.

Three dark-haired women, all missing persons in the Twin Cities over the past fifteen years. All vanished from inside hotels. Each never heard from again. There appeared to be no other connections between them.

"Detective," Chaz asked. "How many missing persons files did you go through to find these?"

"Don't ask," Zingermann answered, turning into the parking lot of a well-lit medical complex. "...all of them."

*

New Richmond, WI

Barry always saved the best for last.

The wailing in the kennels told him the new girl was waking up. He didn't worry too much about the crashing: she wasn't going to get out, and while she might bruise herself on the wire, there wasn't a lot more damage she could do to herself. She had water and a mattress and a drain: she'd be fine until he got back. It would take some time to tame her so he could safely see to her medical needs. He'd start once the sedation wore off. It was a chore, but soon she'd be as well-behaved as the others.

In the meantime, he let himself through the soundproofed doors to his own living quarters. He was careful to lock them, and to hide the key before he opened the interior set. *She* couldn't be allowed to find out where he kept it--or even that it existed. *She* had to think that the power to open the doors rested only with him.

It was good that he took precautions, because when he stepped into the living room she was sitting at the low table with a book open in front of her, a page pinched between her fingers. Three empty bags of chips were spread out around her; she was halfway done with the fourth. Orange cheese powder smeared her face, her skinny fingers, and the paper. She had to kneel up to see over the edge of the coffee table.

Barry paused before the door as it latched.

"Hello, Papa," she said in Russian.

"Hello, Zhenya," he said. "What are you reading?"

"Something from your shelf," she said. "It's called *Justine*. I don't understand it."

"It's about grown-up men and women," Barry said. "You don't need to understand it yet."

"Oh," she said. "But the protagonist is a little girl--"

"Much older than you," he said. "You are two. She is twelve. Someday you will be twelve, too, and you will understand. Are you hungry, Zhenya?"

Her face lit up. "Starving," she said.

*

Somewhere over Florida

Arthur Tan's head rocked gently against the oval window of a 737, haloed by

the sunrise shimmering off myriad parallel scratches in the transparent plastic. Lau, in the aisle seat, watched a slender filament of drool explore his sculptured chin and tried not to think about how many compression cycles this aged piece of equipment had undergone.

The bump of the landing gear deploying opened his eyes. He blinked and pitched the bridge of his nose, then stifled a yawn.

"Sleeping on duty, Agent Tan?"

"My partner had my back," he said. He checked his watch and turned to glance out the window. His left thumb fiddled with his wedding ring.

"Padma's not happy about the midnight call?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "Are you?"

"You notice," Lau said, "I go home to... not even a cat."

"She's not taking it out on me. I just... well, I miss her when I travel," he said, ducking his chin.

"I judge your manliness positively for this admission." Lau winked.

Tan smiled--there and gone, like Jeremy Brett. "And Naima. Although Naima's--"

"Terrible twos?"

"Living up to the toddler reputation," he said. "But that's not what's bugging me."

If it wasn't marital pressure, then it was looking for comfort in the wedding ring. "Celentano."

A guess, but she said it with certainty.

Tan huffed, and did a creditable Joe Mantegna. "'Well, I have come to inform you that now it's your turn to do *us* a favor.' Wait, was that racist?"

Lau shrugged. "Probably. But Victor would make a pretty good mob boss."

"You're telling me." He winced, working his jaw to pop his ears.

"He's putting pressure on you."

"How did you guess?" He looked at his hands. "Reyes had better watch his back, Nik. Brutus is leaning in for that kidney shot."

Act III

Minneapolis, MN

First light was just beginning to gray the eastern sky, still too dim to compete with the puddles of light under the streetlamps, as Falkner and her team crossed ice-scarred asphalt and picked their way between the small heaps of plow scruff that marked the curb. "Hasn't been much of a winter," Zingermann said apologetically.

"Don't feel like you need to produce more on our account," Brady replied. Falkner gave him an assessing glance while his attention was distracted. Shoulders tight, jaw set. Cracking jokes reflexively. Probably feeling all the shame and dismay of their last trip out here.

But holding it together. Doing his job. She thought about the Brady of days past, simmering while they combed eastern Texas for any sign of Chaz--full of rage and fear that leaked out of him at any provocation. This was a stronger, saner man--more level and more healed. Some good things had come out of the past few years, and Falkner needed to hang on to that.

Especially when Celentano was calling her in early for closed-door conferences.

When they entered the hospital, Falkner sent Todd to start working through the medical reports. Brady took Zingermann and the car, intending to review the physical evidence and walk through the hotel where the abduction had occurred. An agent from the Minnesota field office would be by to deliver a second car for the team's use.

Falkner was relieved to see that Bethany Keene had been given a private room and some clothes slightly more dignified than a hospital johnny: scrubs and paper slippers, with a men's terrycloth robe to lend her warmth. She still sat in the bed like a schoolgirl waiting to be punished, an image that left Falkner equal parts homesick and infuriated.

Falkner came in with just Chaz. He was male, but unless he chose to turn it off he was also about as unintimidating as it was possible for an FBI agent to be--and all of Falkner's female agents were busy elsewhere. Worth would have been the right woman for this job, on so many levels. But Worth was a hole that couldn't be filled, so they'd just have to work around her.

Chaz stayed just inside the door, his back to the frame, effacing himself so effectively that Falkner was pretty sure he was using the mirror. She walked into the room alone, pausing at the edge of the bed curtain. *Grant the victim as much agency as possible.*

"Ms. Keene? May I sit down? I'm Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and my partner is Special Agent Charles Villette. Detective Zingermann has asked us to become involved in

your case--"

Keene blinked, her hands a little less white across her knees. "He believed me?"

"He called the FBI," Falkner said with a smile. She held up a tiny recorder, and when Keene nodded she laid it on the bedside table and switched it on. A formality only, when Chaz was present. "He's been looking for you for three years, Ms. Keene. We all want to find out who did this to you."

Keene hugged her knees even tighter, but only with one hand. She wasn't thin--wherever she'd been, she'd been well-fed, and probably hadn't gotten enough exercise judging by the slack flesh of her forearms--and she couldn't curl up as tightly as she obviously wanted to. Still, her left hand reached out, clutching the bed rail. She rocked back and forth, pulling against the rail and then slumping back. It reminded Falkner of a chimpanzee in a too-small cage, though the comparison shamed her as soon as she thought of it.

"I don't believe me," she said.

Falkner edged to the chair beside the bed, judging that Keene was too distracted to give permission, and that she'd be more comfortable if Falkner wasn't looming. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. She knew it showed the gun when her jacket gaped, but she wanted to make herself solid and nonthreatening. She thought about Bethany's mother, and what Falkner would want done if it were one of her own daughters in that bed.

"Your body believes you," she said, gently.

Bethany began to beat against the railing with her left hand.

She looked at it, brow furrowing, and made a grab with her own right hand to the wrist. The left hand strained, then went limp, fingers half-curled in what Falkner could read as despair--or frustration.

"I can't *remember* anything! How can I help you if I can't tell you where I was, or what happened to me?"

There was a sound from the door, and Falkner startled as she realized she'd forgotten Chaz was in the room. She turned in time to see a peculiar expression cross his face--a kind of transparency. He glanced left. His hand shot out and snagged a chair. He spun it, straddled it, and leaned forwards over the back, arms folded.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me what happened to you."

Falkner opened her mouth and then made herself close it again. Bethany was staring at Chaz with a look of ferocious concentration. The left hand, still cradled in her lap, twitched spasmodically. Chaz nodded, eyes on Bethany's face.

She said, "I told you I don't--"

"You do," he said. "It's okay. Somebody just... hid the memories from part of you. The part that talks. But there's a whole bunch of parts of a human being, Ms. Keene. Usually they find ways to talk to one another--we call it intuition, hunches. The voice of our guardian angels. But something's happened to the part of your brain that translates between the other parts and your conscious mind."

"How do you know that?" Bethany asked, eyes wide. Her hands folded themselves in her lap now, almost primly.

"I'm a translator," Chaz said. He'd obviously planned this bit out in advance, because there was no hesitation. "I can do what the damaged bit of your brain does, normally. Do I have your permission?"

Bethany nodded, lip pinched between her teeth. "What do I do?"

"Just relax," Chaz said. "You understand that this may not be things you want to hear?"

She laughed like somebody rattling broken crockery in a box. "I miscarried a baby I don't remember existing, Agent..."

"Villette," Falkner supplied.

"Villette," Bethany said gratefully. "I was apparently held captive and r--*raped*, and I don't remember three years of my life. How can knowing what really happened be worse than whatever I--" she gasped, kept going. "--whatever I make up in my head?"

Chaz smiled in that way that rearranged his face from goofy Muppet to enchanting Muppet. Falkner wanted to push his hair out of his eyes. He said, "I think you're very strong. Are you ready?"

"What do I need to do?"

He shook his head. "Just remember. And don't worry if your conscious mind doesn't seem to be coming up with any details. Let it wander. I'll do all the work."

She gave him a dubious look, eyebrow raised. He nodded.

Bethany Keene closed her eyes, and Chaz Villette spoke with her voice.

*

"There are cages. Three cages. Like runs in a dog pound. There are girls in all of them. Me, and there's Amber and Brigit. We're not supposed to talk, to have names. But we talk when he's not there.

Brigit is a computer programmer. She had just come to St. Paul for a job and was living in a hotel until she found a place. Amber is a student from England. She is--she was--doing a year at the University of Minnesota.

Except Brigit... He takes her away in a wheelbarrow. And then there's Madison. Madison's older, she's thirty-one. She doesn't look it. She's in the kennel next to mine, and I have to watch while he--

On the digital recorder, Chaz's perfect version of Bethany's voice choked off. Reyes winced, his finger hovering over the kill switch. Falkner, across the desk in the unused administrative office they'd appropriated, let herself nod.

With an audible sigh of relief, Reyes pushed the button. "Just give me the précis for now."

Falkner reached down deep and found the detached, clinical part of her self she used for reporting bad news to superior officers, then and now. "He punished them if they talked, if they humanized themselves to him in any way. He fed them, kept them clean and warm. He had an accent. German or Polish, she thought. She's not very good with accents. Amber said Russian. He raped them on a regular schedule. Bethany said that his left hand... seemed to try to impede his actions. To comfort her."

"Alien hand syndrome," Reyes said. "It happens when there's damage to the corpus callosum and the left and right hemispheres can't talk to each other any more. They're left guessing what's going on in the other half of the brain." He snorted. "Like being married."

"Maybe for some people," Falkner said.

Reyes shot an amused look across the desk. "And he's somehow forced it upon his victims. Locked the knowledge of what he's done to them away inside part of their brain that can't communicate it."

"That's not a really dangerous manifestation, at least." Falkner said.

Reyes' scarred lips pressed thin. "Not unless he can do it at a distance," he said.

"Call Brady and Sol," she told him. "I'll go talk to Chaz."

*

Tampa, FL

"Ms. Alicia Keene?" Lau said, to the emaciated woman framed in the door of her house. Her complexion was as transparently pale as an English rose; Lau couldn't imagine how anybody could stay that white in Florida unless they never left the house. She shouldn't be more than fifty-five, but she dressed--and looked--ten years older. Lau watched her appraisingly. Skinny as she was--

"Yes," said the woman. Guarded. Eyes like a whipped dog's, waiting the next blow.

Lau held up her identification. "I'm Nicolette Lau. This is Arthur Tan. We're with the Federal Bureau of Invest--"

Alicia Keene staggered backward, fingers slipping from the doorframe. She sat down hard on the floor, blue slacks riding up blue-veined calves. White cotton socks slumped atop her orthopedic shoes. Her hand pressed her mouth, and as Lau jumped across the doorsill to crouch beside her, she struck ineffectually at Nikki. "No. No, no, no!"

"Bethany's alive," Lau said, grabbing the hand that pawed at her, holding Keene's attention. Keene's hand felt like sticks wrapped in tissue paper. Not a gamma: just somebody who couldn't remember or care enough to eat. "Ms. Keene! Look at me! Bethany's alive. She's at a hospital in Minneapolis. We've come to take you to her."

Tan was right behind Lau, just inside the door. Dividing his attention between interior and exterior. The cop's hard-learned understanding: just because they were on a mission of mercy didn't mean there was no danger.

"Alive?" said Keene.

"Alive," Tan confirmed.

She sat upright, wobbly but determined. "Let me tell my husband. And call a neighbor for the cat. I'll get my coat."

*

Minneapolis, MN

In the hall outside, Chaz leaned against the wall, arms folded in that pose that looked like he was hugging himself against a chill. Falkner stopped when she saw him, but let the door swing shut quietly and the knob latch. "You did good in there."

"Thank you." A pause while he looked for words. If he'd prepared *this* speech, it was deserting him. She gave him the time. He said, "How are you doing?"

She shrugged. "This is no worse than a lot of them."

"I meant Celentano."

"Oh."

"Do you think I don't know he wants a tighter rein, and whether... whether what happened to Daphne was a mistake or not, he's going to make it into one."

"I can handle it," Falkner said.

"You can handle anything," Chaz said, his taut body language uncoiling into earnestness. "Just don't forget that *you* don't always have to. Not alone, anyway. Not without help."

She stilled. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"God," she said. "Look at you, all grown up."

It just came out, and for a moment she was terrified she'd said the wrong thing, offended him. But he stilled too, and then he smiled and gave her a squeeze before letting his hand drop away. "One for all," he said. "All for one."

"Even if we're coming apart at the seams?"

He was really *tall* when he stood up straight. It was easy to forget that the rest of the time. "Especially then."

*

An average-sized hotel, even one that didn't keep particularly good track of its guests, still had a lot of security cameras, and Hafidha was getting a too-in-depth overview of all of them while she tried to remember not to scratch at her damned scalp anymore. *Yes, Virginia. The Government does put microchips in your brain.* Brady had been unable to get access to the actual room from which Bethany Keene had disappeared, but the hotel staff swore the one two doors down was an exact duplicate.

He was currently crawling under the bed, muttering into his headset that this should have been Lau's job, while Zingermann held the flashlight. Hafidha--her monitors flickering with images of people bored in elevators, people kissing in elevators, people staring irritatedly forward and trying to ignore their traveling companions in elevators--could just pick up Zingermann's dialogue.

"We did all that C.S.I. stuff," he said. "You know, stuff with Keene's cell phone. Stuff with the carpets. There was a clean glass in the sink, but it had been rinsed. Lip prints on the edge. We got to use all kinds of forensics stuff we can hardly ever break out."

"Missing White Woman Syndrome," Brady said tiredly. Rustling and scraping sounds told Hafidha that he was crawling back out from under the bed.

"Afraid so." Zingermann actually sounded apologetic. "Pretty one, too. I'm guessing you didn't actually find anything under the bed in the wrong hotel room, three years later?"

Bellhops and businesswomen, tourists and housekeepers paraded past on Hafidha's monitors--and behind her eyelids. Luggage carts and room service trolleys and housekeeping carts. Maintenance hauling a replacement fridge. Bethany Keene, riding an elevator up with a bellhop with a large rolling bag, another uniformed flight attendant, and a bored-looking businessman with a leather overnight bag. Bethany and her coworker got off at the same floor; the bellhop and the businessman continued up.

"Did anybody check on her fellow flight and cabin crew?" Hafidha asked.

"Spotless," Zingermann answered, after Brady consulted with him briefly.

Hafidha rolled her eyes. "Danny, please tell Detective Zingermann to put on his headset, if he has one? I'll patch him in."

She overheard Brady saying, "Just do it--she's got skills--" and a moment later she had conferenced Zingermann into the call.

"There. Much cozier. So, Brady, what did you discover under the wrong bed?"

"Well," he said. "I discovered that somebody could hide there. Or hide a body there, though we know that's not what happened to Bethany. But it's a useful data point."

"Huh," said Zingermann.

"It's a gift of his, Detective," Hafidha said. "What else?"

"I looked over the scene photos. Based on those, no signs of a struggle in the room--"

"No signs of a struggle at all," Zingermann said.

That silence would be Brady nodding. Hafidha heard the light thumps of his shoes on the carpet as he paced. "The room has a peephole and a security bar. Hafidha, say you're an attractive, slight young woman who travels for a living. Your coworker is next door. Is there any way a stranger gets into your hotel room without you making enough of a fuss that your coworker hears it, no matter how soundly she sleeps?"

The same bellhop was riding down again, this time in the company of two older women with expensive hair. He got off the elevator at Bethany's floor.

Something caught Hafidha's attention.

"Suitcase," she said.

"Like lost luggage?" Zingermann asked. "I'd open the door for that."

"Flight attendants don't check bags," Brady said.

"No," said Hafidha. "You'd open the door for hotel staff, right? I've got a bellhop here who's been riding the elevators up and down with the same rolling bag. Now maybe he missed his floor--"

"Crap," Brady said.

"But the suitcase doesn't drag like there's anything in it. And Danny? It's a really... *big*... bag."

She heard the thrill of the chase in his voice. "Get me a screen cap of his face on my phone and I'll buy you three hot fudge sundaes."

Zingermann chimed in. "Can you find him leaving?"

"On it," Hafidha said. Her fingers were picking through her hair again, probing the beaded scars. She jerked them down and curled them around the arms of her chair.

Jellybeans. Something to do with her fingers that wasn't trichotillomania.

Act IV

New Richmond, WI

She shivered with nerves, not with cold. This place was warm, in spite of the concrete floor and the yellow cotton jersey nightshirt that brushed her bare knees. It was bright, too, from the overhead fluorescents on the other side of her chain-link ceiling.

She could smell the laundry soap in her shirt, and see the old faint stains on the front and the darker color at the seams where the fabric wasn't as faded. The garment had belonged to someone else before her. Or maybe the someone else was her; maybe she'd had it for years and years. But she couldn't remember what the stains were.

Me and a gun...

Her left hand clenched on the knitted collar and pulled hard. She didn't have anything else to wear, though. She cupped her right hand around the left and pinned it against her breastbone to keep it still.

The others wore the same kind of shirt: blue for the woman on the other side

of the chain-link wall, and gray for the woman in the--the space--beyond. Room. Except rooms weren't made of fencing. These were like the enclosures where zoos kept animals when they weren't on exhibit. When they were sick or being--

Me and a gun...

She tried to relax, because the shivering made her teeth chatter, and she wanted to speak. She twisted her fingers in the wire that separated her from the woman in the blue shirt. "I have to pee," she said. "What do I do when I have to pee?"

The woman was dark-haired, and she sat on the bare mattress with her legs stretched out straight on the floor. She turned her head slowly, and her face seemed to come back to life. It was pretty now, instead of like a bad painting.

"The drain," she said.

There was one in the floor. "Just...like that?"

The woman in the blue shirt nodded. "What's your name?"

For one awful moment nothing occurred to her. "Marnie," she answered, and it felt true. "What's yours?"

The woman in blue frowned and closed her eyes. "Madison. My name is Madison."

The woman on the other side of Madison rose and clutched at the wire between them. "My name is Amber. I'm nineteen years old."

Amber sounded like someone on TV. Masterpiece Theater. England, that was it. Maybe that was why she seemed older than nineteen. "Why are we here?" Marnie asked.

"I don't know." Madison's far hand, her left, clawed at the mattress.

Me and a gun and a man on my back...

That was from a song, Marnie realized. Not even one she liked. *Boys for Pele* was her favorite Tori Amos album, not that one. Sometimes you got songs in your head for no good reason.

"We've been here a long time," Amber said.

"Are you sure?" The woman in the blue shirt sucked her lips in over her teeth. "No. I was home just last week. I had a conference to go to, so I packed--" She stopped and shook her head. "I'd remember you, I think. What's your name?"

The woman in the gray shirt blinked and looked down at her fingers tangled in the wire. She gave a little sob, then blurted out, "Amber! My name is Amber. I go to university. Oh, my god. What am I doing here?"

The woman in the blue shirt closed her hands hard over her knees; the skin paled around her fingertips. "And my name is Madison. What's your name?" she asked, turning.

"Marnie," she said, pretty sure it was. "I want to leave. I'm not supposed to be here. Please, tell me how to leave."

Outside Amber's cage (*It's a cage! They trap things, put them in cages, and make them*--) she could see a door set in a cinder-block wall. The latch rattled and clicked, as if a key was working the lock.

The other two women started backward. The one in gray stumbled over the edge of her mattress and half-fell against the wire. The one in blue pulled her legs in and yanked her shirt down over them, pressing her back to the wall.

Their faces were blank, but not empty.

"What is it?" Marnie whispered.

"I don't remember," said the woman in blue, and her voice came out high and thin with fear.

Marnie backed away from the door. "I've never seen Barbados," she said as the doorknob turned.

That was from the song, too. She wondered what it meant.

*

Minneapolis, MN

Chaz's phone shrilled the Looney Tunes theme, and his heart skipped in his chest. Beside him, Falkner startled and then smiled.

He slid the slider and said, "Hey."

"Hey," Hafidha said back. "I just uploaded a film to your phone. I need your best supervillain guess as to how much that rolling bag weighs."

"One moment." He switched the call to speaker and minimized it, then opened the email-waiting icon. A grainy security camera video showed a broad-shouldered bellhop heaving a rolling bag's stuck wheel out of the gap between an elevator floor and a hallway. "It's a small video..."

"You're magic."

"Hah," he said. A familiar pinch of headache between his eyes. "Hundred

forty. Give or take."

"How much does Bethany Keene weigh?"

"She's gained weight since she was taken."

"Fine, you've seen photos. How much *did* she weigh?"

"Hundred thirty," Chaz said reluctantly.

"She's in the bag."

"She's in that bag," he confirmed, while Falkner leaned over his shoulder, her mouth pinched in dismay. "You got a good cap of that guy's face?"

"Brady's already showing it around the hotel staff."

Chaz heard Falkner's breath come out in a puff. "Good work, Hafidha."

*

Tampa, FL

August Keene was a bulky man with a drinker's nose. Sensitive as she tried to be to his grief and shock, Lau took an instant dislike to him--one that was not ameliorated by the dubious look he gave Tan and the twice-dubious echo that bounced off Lau. Her opinion wasn't improved on the way to the airport, in Tampa morning traffic, as she overheard him lean towards his wife and stage-whisper, "Both Oriental? Aren't they supposed to have a white guy? At least to drive?"

She would have rested her head in her hands, but it would have been unprofessional.

Tan caught her eye sideways. In Robocop's voice, he murmured, " Serve the public trust, protect the innocent, uphold the law. Even douchebags."

Her struggle with unprofessionalism dissolved into a tight-lipped sneeze of laughter.

"What?" Keene asked, leaning over the back seat.

Lau waved a hand beside her face. "Allergies," she said, indicating watering eyes. "Please excuse."

*

Minneapolis, MN

Falkner's phone rang ten minutes later. "He's not an employee," Brady said, his tone vibrating with suppressed excitement. "He never was."

"But you got something anyway."

"Reyes said the witness identified an accent? Eastern European?"

"Yes?"

"The hotel had a guest at the time. One Buryan Alexeivich Petrewski, naturalized citizen of the United States and, Hafidha tells me, resident of New Richmond, Wisconsin. Which happens to be about an hour from here, so why does he need a hotel room? But that's not all--"

The pause hung heavy, until Falkner realized they were all waiting for Daphne to fill it. Chaz must have figured it out a second sooner, because he said--

"Epilepsy! He was treated for epilepsy in the Soviet Union, wasn't he? They severed his corpus callosum to inhibit the seizures?"

"Brain surgery," Brady confirmed. "God *damn*, can they all be this clean?"

On the heel of his words, Reyes slammed through the door, bouncing with adrenaline. "Marnie Ericsen," he said. "Twenty-two, nursing student in town for a job interview. Did not make her flight home yesterday evening, and her mother can't raise her on her cellphone. Failed to check out of her hotel room, and all her bags are still in it."

"We know where he lives," Falkner said. Her fingers curled as if her palm itched. "When?" she said.

With every tick of the clock, a young woman could be--*was*--suffering horrible things. But they had a better chance of getting her back alive if--

She saw the black math happening behind Reyes' eyes, the equations the same as the ones she ran. But he was team leader. He was the one who had to open his mouth and say the horrible words.

"We wait for Lau and Tan."

*

In the elevator up to Bethany's floor, Ms. Keene kept touching her face. "Do I look all right?" she said. "I've lost so much weight. Will she recognize me?"

The door slid open and they emerged into the hall. Quick steps slowed, became reluctant... but the Keenes grasped each other's hands and rallied. Forged on.

Tan knew better than to offer her a verbal reassurance that might turn out to be a lie. He said, "Sometimes these things take a while. Agent Lau and I will make sure you have contact information for victim resources, a competent

therapist--"

They were at Bethany Keene's door. Chaz stood beside it, silent and sunken-cheeked. He smelled like pancakes and acetone. As the Keenes hesitated before the door, he took Lau's elbow and drew her and Tan aside.

"Eat!" she hissed, glowering at him. He winced; Tan was profiler enough by now to read the unstated sentence that passed between them. *What would Worth say?*

Even unsaid, it struck home. But he squared his shoulders and said, "We've got your armor in the cars. Brady and Hafidha found him."

*

The armor for Tan was borrowed from the local field office. He was a tall-ish, medium broad guy, like a lot of agents; it fit respectably well. As he was fitting the chest straps, Brady came up beside him. They were of a height, but it looked bigger on Brady--maybe because he was twice as wide. "I'm sorry about this," Brady said. "But you're about to get a cold, sudden dunking into what the ACTF does for a living. You should know that if we corner this guy... we may not be able to take him alive."

Tan hoped Brady wasn't suggesting that this team looked for opportunities to put people down. The ACTF had a lot of violent resolutions, but Lau and Reyes were both rated among the best in the Bureau at conflict resolution--and when Tan had mentioned the high kill rate to Celentano, Celentano had just nodded and said, "It's an unfortunate side effect of what they do."

"Like snipers?" Tan had said.

With the memory of Celentano's ironic nod framed in his memory, Tan said, "I understand."

Brady said, "You will soon enough. For now... stick with me or Nikki. If it goes south--I won't tell you not to shoot unless somebody tells you, because I trust your judgment and I don't want you to hesitate. But bear in mind that things may not be what they seem. He may have... a weird kind of control over the minds of the hostages. Like Stockholm syndrome, but more of it. And if you start shooting, don't stop until you're sure he's not getting up again. Treat him like a fucking angel dust horror movie zombie. You won't be far wrong."

"Got it," Tan said, queasy to his core.

"Welcome to the arcane secrets of the WTF," Brady said. "Sorry about this in advance."

Act V

New Richmond, WI

Chaz picked his cuticles in a slowing SUV. The afternoon light reflected off a clapboard farmhouse with a tall porch and a fresh, unobjectionable coat of white paint. A band of trees would have shaded it in summertime, but now straggled naked across a rolling slope like a rank of exhausted refugees. It was a pleasant-looking place, outside of a little two-story brick town distinguished by a water tower of Midwestern proportions.

It commanded a view of the road, and in all directions. There was no way they were surprising Mr. Petrewski. The team had discussed their options on the way in. The ambulances and local P.D. stayed well back as the borrowed FBI Suburban Assault Vehicle pulled up beside the county highway. They would go hard and fast, and hope for the best.

"Oh, God," said Zingermann, over the noise of the engine. "We could have cracked this case three years ago."

"Hafidha could have cracked this case three years ago," Brady said, unexpectedly kind. "You worked it better than anyone else would. You preserved the evidence."

"On three," Reyes said, and whatever Zingermann might have answered was lost in the sound of helmet faceplates lowering and locking into place.

Todd, the civilian, stayed in the car.

"Hafidha," Falkner said into the headset. "Booby traps?"

"Nothing electronic."

"She can do *that*?" Tan said, incredulous.

"All the way from D.C., Artful," Hafs purred. "You haven't seen *half* my bag of tricks."

"Agent Tan," Falkner said. "You were bomb school."

"Yes ma'am."

"You know what an IED looks like?"

His helmet rasped on Kevlar as he nodded. "Anything at all."

"Well." Chaz could tell she was joking; he wasn't sure Arthur could. "Keep an eye out for that."

*

Because of the presumed presence of hostages, they hit the house like a

SWAT team, front and back, amidst shattered wood and shattered glass. It looked like such a nice house.

So many of them... looked like nice houses. Chaz, following Falkner, should have been distracted by the hammering of his heart, the tunnel-vision of adrenaline, the dizzying pulse stretching his arteries. But there was nothing.

It was so... quiet in the house. The nice house, the *dusty, uninhabited* house. It looked like a hotel room, like a model home decorated by a blind time-traveler from the 1970s.

A chorus of "Clear!" rang through still air. Chaz heard his own breathing, saw it fog and vanish on the inside of his helmet. He and Falkner paused in the kitchen. He saw Brady, Lau, and Tan emerge from the basement, heard Reyes and Zingermann tromp down from upstairs.

"Nothing," Brady said. "No sign of anyone."

"No sign that anyone ever lived here, really," Falkner said. "But somebody pays to keep the power on--"

*

Barry heard the tromp of shoes across the floor of his camouflage, the shattering of doors as they were broken open. He crouched beside the new girl, who lay limp as knotted rags in his arms, squeezing liquid into her mouth from a water bottle. "Drink," he said. She swallowed, unwillingly, greenish fluid overflowing the corners of her mouth. He imagined her expression burned with rage, though--really--he could see it unfocused in the futile struggle to prevent his control of her.

She was just an automaton. He could make her do anything, and she wouldn't even remember it afterwards.

The left hand pushed her hair out of her eyes. Barry was too busy to slap it away.

*

"Hafs," Falkner said to thin air. "Help me out here."

Hafidha's voice came through the headset clear as glass. "Well, his electric bills are pretty high for a guy who never dusts and keeps the thermostat set at fifty. No phone, gas heat--*hello*."

"We're on the clock, Hafidha," Reyes said.

"It's too old for any building permits to be online, but the property was surveyed back in the seventies, and Dig Safe has the coordinates of a septic tank and gas line added in 1962. Guys. It's got a bomb shelter."

The words fell into sudden stillness. Two heartbeats, then Falkner snapped *Find it* and everyone scattered. Tan, too, moving as if somebody had slapped a sheaf of program cards into his reader. Falkner had the confidence of command in her voice, and people--even (or perhaps especially) trained agents--responded.

Except for Chaz Villette, who stood in the middle of the room turning like a statue on a rotating pedestal. Tan thought he was frowning, but it was hard to tell through the faceplate.

Villette lunged like a toy powered by a wound rubber band, dropping to both knees and ducking under the dusty, lineoleum-surfaced table. The floor was black asbestos tile, the kind that would leave a layer of gook on the bare feet of children who ran across it regularly. But Chaz ignored it, and instead dug his nails in to a particular spot on the wainscoting.

"Dammit," he mutterd, pulling back a bleeding hand, nail torn to the quick. "*Brady*!"

He didn't bother coming out from under the table or dragging it aside. He just stood, and Tan jumped eight inches in the air as the table crashed, upside-down, to the floor.

"Hidden door," Chaz said, pointing as Brady materialized silently beside them. Tan didn't jump again, but only because his nerves had snapped. "Get us in."

"It opens out," Brady said.

The hinges on the half-height door were countersunk and had been concealed by a table leg. There was no visible means by which to open it.

Brady punched them out of the wall by prying it open with a Halligan tool, splintering wainscoting and rending the wallboard behind. The lock on the other side of the door shattered as he grabbed the edge in a gloved hand and yanked. The door landed on top of the overturned table; Villette and Brady shared a glance.

In the resulting gap, the head of a metal ladder gleamed in a well-lit shaft. "You wouldn't want the cannibal post-apocalyptic neighbors breaking in and eating your canned goods," Villette said, his thin voice dripping with irony.

"Guys?" Tan barked into his headset to summon the rest of the team. "I think we got it."

*

The ladder was nerve-wracking. Tan was ashamed to find himself glad that Brady went first. His skin crawled at the thought of how horribly exposed the

big agent was coming down, even though he kicked back off the ladder and dropped the last eight feet to land in a crouch. Lau landed behind him a half-second later, facing in the opposite direction.

"Clear," she said. And then, "We've got cages."

Tan found himself the fifth person into a clean, well-lit concrete space. Gray metal shelves of dry and canned goods lined one wall, and several doors led to what must be adjoining rooms or corridors. This was not just a bomb shelter. It was a bunker, an absolute monument to cold-war paranoia.

"Should turn this into a museum," Brady said.

"Like Auschwitz," Zingermann said--the first words he'd muttered in minutes, though Tan had heard him gag.

A sweet smell, sickly, filled the room. Tan didn't raise his faceplate to get a deeper whiff--but as he turned, he saw a dark-haired woman clutched the wire of a cage very much like a dog's kennel run--eight feet long, perhaps six feet tall and four feet wide. Two identical cages stood beside it, and a woman lay curled on a mattress in each.

"Antifreeze," the standing woman gasped. "He... *somebody*. Somebody drank..."

Reyes was on his headset to the paramedics. Brady crouched beside the wire. He put his hands beside the woman's, but did not touch her.

Her eyes closed with concentration. Her tone changed, became professional. She recited, as if from a textbook: "Symptoms of Stage 1 ethylene glycol poison... poisoning include: intoxication, nystagmus, headaches, incoordination, confusion--"

Tan came to stand behind Brady. Sweat stood in cold beads on the woman's brow despite the heat of the room. Somehow, whatever Petrewski had done to her brain, to her memories--the undamaged person inside of her was finding a way to communicate.

"Kidney failure," she said. Her eyes opened, her expression full of confusion, like a drunk who hears what he is saying but doesn't identify the words or the voice. "If it's not treated. Do you understand?"

Brady said, "Marnie Ericsen?" *The student nurse.*

She nodded.

"Daniel Brady. FBI. We'll get you out; we'll get you medical assistance." She'd never know that his calm demeanor, his reassuring professionalism, were one hundred percent grain-fed eleventh-grade acting. Tan only

recognized it because he used the same trick himself. "Which way did he go?"

She shook her head. "I don't--"

But silently, her left hand pointed.

*

By then, Lau was moving fastest. She'd held back from the cluster by the cages, unable to force herself to move close. But she'd seen the captive woman's gesture, and her nervous system responded to it as if she'd been fired from the taut string of a bow. She could feel Tan and Brady behind her, Falkner staying behind with Zingermann to secure the other rooms, Reyes and Chaz at Tan's heels. They moved sideways, backs to walls, inching over one another like crabs.

The corridor wasn't long, and the door at the other end stood open. Lights were on inside. It was a living room, and there was another open door beyond.

Still, Lau almost tripped over the body. A white man in his late fifties or early sixties, hair cropped in close bristles around a balding pate. He was gaunt, his color yellowish--which wasn't just the light, or the gray maintenance coverall he wore.

He lay on his back, and his left hand was clutched around the hilt of a knife. The blade vanished up under his sternum; the blood had stopped pulsing minutes before. Slashes on the palm of his right hand might have oozed lazily still, but it was impossible to tell behind the rest of the blood.

"Gamma," Lau said, crouching to take his wizened wrist. No pulse; she hadn't expected one. The sticky wetness under her knee wasn't blood; it had spilled from a water bottle that still contained a puddle of greenish fluid.

"Old gamma," Chaz said. "I guess we were right about the evil hand."

He was thinking of Eddie. She knew because they were all thinking of Eddie.

"That's the opposite of an evil hand," Brady said.

Zingermann looked up from the dead man and stopped, gun half-risen again, striding towards that open door. "Hey guys? Look at this stuff, would you? This is a little kid's room."

*

Reyes found her, jammed between a bureau and the wall. She'd gotten herself in there; it didn't seem likely that she could get herself out. But it had kept her safe long enough for the sane part of Buryan Petrewski to do what he should have done long ago. Reyes felt his own judgment of the dead man, unprofessional and savage, and was not moved to censure himself for it.

Maybe Petrewski should get credit for protecting a child. Maybe he should be pitied for having to spend his life locked in a skull with... God, there weren't even words. Abductor? Rapist? It was inadequate.

Reyes couldn't help but feel that if Petrewski had found the strength to sacrifice himself on behalf of the half-dozen or more adult women he'd tortured over... well, they'd find out. Sooner or later. How long he'd been at it. How many there had been.

If they ever found all of them.

For now, Reyes smoothed his face and held the little girl's warm hands to steady her until Brady got the dresser hauled gingerly aside. She didn't cry; she didn't fuss over the dead body or the room full of scary strangers.

Reyes picked her up, an arm under her bottom. She wore a frilly blue dress and white socks, patent leather shoes that looked like a memory of a different era. She might have been two. Reyes turned to look for Falkner or Tan--or even Chaz. Somebody with some child-rearing experience. And if she was a gamma? A beta? She certainly wasn't acting like a normal child, but like one of those creepy children from historic literature. Young MacDuff. Pearl.

A problem for tomorrow.

Until the little girl raised her chin and looked at him with huge, dark eyes fringed with seal-brown lashes, and said very seriously, in Cuban-accented Spanish, "I'm Zhenya. Will I have to get a job? Who will take care of me now?"

"Villette," Reyes said.

"I don't speak Spanish," Villette replied, shaking his head as if he had a fly in his ear.

"Is that Spanish?" the little girl said. "I've never spoken that before. The music in it is very pretty."

*

Minneapolis, MN

Reyes leaned against the observation window of the examining room, watching Amber Silsbury's reunion with her daughter. He didn't shift as Todd came up on his left.

"All three of the women are going to make it," Reyes said. "Let's hear it for hemodialysis and Fomepizole." He didn't mention their psychological state.

Todd didn't ask. He nodded to the window. "How's Zhenya?"

"Autumn," Reyes said.

"Winter, actually," Todd said. "Use your verbs, Steve."

Reyes snorted. "Her name is Autumn. Her mother is left-handed. She wrote it out for me." He was proud of himself, that he said it completely without irony. "*Amber* named her daughter Autumn. I think we should call her that."

"She's a beta."

Reyes nodded slowly. He couldn't take his attention from the young woman and the child. There was no bond there, no affection. Amber held her daughter with... revulsion. Resignation. Her left hand would not touch the girl at all.

"Yeah," Reyes said. "I noticed."

Todd laid a hand on his shoulder. "Vaya con dios."

Reyes finally dragged his gaze off the victims to glare at his old friend. "That's my line."

Todd said, "You don't believe in God."

"When it comes to you, I don't think He cares too much about who believes in Him."

*

Reyes knew it was coming, of course. He would have guessed on the plane; actually Villette walked up beside him at the creamer counter of the airport coffee shop. Reyes hadn't even attempted the tea.

"You can't put her in care," Villette said. "She's a little girl. Idlewood--"

"She can stay with her mother."

An incredulous bark of laughter. "Did you see them together? Her mother can't even touch her. Can she raise a little girl with the intellect of a thirty-year-old genius, who can speak any language you can? No matter who you are?"

"Her mother is going to stay with me." Reyes slopped coffee onto his hand. It was hot. He set the cup down with exaggerated care despite the burning, thinking about the *gom jabbar*, and pressed his fingertips to his mouth. "Kay and Casey have already agreed to offer support services."

"You can't do that," Villette said. "Ethics--"

Their gazes crossed. Reyes knew he smiled.

"Fuck ethics," Reyes said. "I quit. I retire, more precisely. Amber is willing to

stay in my spare room with the girl for a while. We'll see if they connect. If Amber can learn..." He shrugged.

Stephen Reyes, at a loss for words. *Who are you*?

"Reyes--" A breath, and Villette choked on it.

"Don't," Reyes said. He turned; he put his back to the coffee counter and ignored the irritated stares of a delayed customer who was probably mistaking this for a lover's quarrel. "Don't. I know what I did wrong, and I can't fix it. But I don't have to make the same mistake again."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C.

Silently, Chaz handed the book to Hafs, its shiny jacket slick against her dust-smoothed fingers. She glanced at the dust jacket: *Murder in the Second City*, by Rupert Beale. She already knew it, but she opened the book anyway and read the epigraph aloud: "...there is no God. Nature sufficeth unto herself; in no wise hath she need of an author... --Donatien Alphonse François, marquis de Sade, *Justine*.... Why'd you bring me this?"

"It's from Petrewski's bunker."

Hafidha tossed the book on the floor. "Barry was trying to understand himself."

"Aren't we all?"

"I've been going through his files--" --thousands and thousands of hours of writing, on 3.5 disks. Many of them hopelessly decayed, and she was having to machine-translate them from the Russian, and hand over the sections that looked important to the Bureau's linguistics people. "You want the worst first?"

"The Anomaly maximizes pain," Chaz said.

She looked at him. The Bug would take it as a dig. But Hafs knew better, and the twitch of his lips told her he knew it too. "Ovulation charts for the captives. He was taking their temperatures."

"Jesus," Chaz said.

"Good thing his swimmers were apparently as fucked up as the rest of him, or there would have been an army of baby betas in that hole. Also, he seems to have been obsessed with the idea that he'd been made into an automaton. Surgically, in the Soviet Union. That they'd taken his family from him and made them automatons too. He wanted his son back. He wanted everybody else to be an automaton too."

She tried to flip her braids. They weren't there. "He wanted to own everybody."

"I could have told you that from the antifreeze." Chaz crossed his arms, uncrossed them. Hugged himself the other way round. "So something bugs me."

"'Bugs' you, Baby Bro?" It could have had an edge to it. Even she wasn't sure, and from the lift of his eyebrows, neither was he.

"Yeah," he said. "How did Petrewski figure out what he needed to do to make Autumn happen? Or was she just..." he flinched. "...an accident?"

*

What is this fascination with the monsters of the past? Are we so pathetic, we twenty-first century humans, that we can conjure at this late date no horrors more compelling, more appalling, than de Sade, Vlad Dracula, the wretched Jack the Ripper? The petty devils of another age are safely quarantined by time. But to examine our own demons with open eyes requires a fortitude not all possess.

--Rupert Beale, Ph.D., Murder in the Second City

Herbs

Arlington, VA, February 2012

The crumbs of potting soil trailed from the patio door through the living room, up the carpeted stairs, and down the hall to the back bedroom. The door was open, but inside it was more dark than light, from the closed curtains.

"Hafs?" Chaz called. "Can I come in?"

His heart rate jumped and sweat prickled under his arms. But not because It might be lying in wait for him. He strained his ears for breathing, for movement. He wanted to use the mirror, but he'd made a promise. Even now, he wouldn't use it on her without cause, without telling her.

Finally he heard Hafidha whisper, "Yeah."

She was sitting on her bed, hands between her knees, head bent, her feet together on the floor. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom the colors of the walls and fabrics rose out of it like koi surfacing in a pond: cranberry, gold, violet blue.

He sat down beside her. He smelled thyme, rosemary, basil, tarragon, mint over the lingering plastic-y odor of paint.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was so low it was barely more than her lips moving. "I tried."

Her arms were striped with long welts, oozing blood in spots. She'd tried.

Chaz wasn't scared because It might get him. He was scared because It might get *her*, sometime when he wasn't there to help.

He swallowed hard and touched her near arm lightly. "Save this for when you really need it. It's just plants. I'll have a whole new batch in by tomorrow."

She made a wet strangled sound in her throat and held out her cupped hands, raised her head. "I saved one."

Cuban oregano. *Plectranthus amboinicus*. The one he'd grown in his old apartment, the same plant his upstairs neighbor had given him five years ago, transplanted to his new life. A little the worse for wear, but still with roots and soil around them.

"Chili verde," she said. "You wrote about it on LiveJournal. I remembered." She swallowed, sounding so tight it hurt Chaz's throat, too. "It helped."

He took the drooping bit of leaf and dirt from her and nodded. "Good save." He was pretty sure trying to say more would be a mistake.

The tears ran steadily down her face as if they might empty out the entire seventy-eight percent of her that was water. The Thing inside her loved that. He wasn't going to give It any of his tears as well. That was part of how he helped; if he didn't show hurt in front of her, It couldn't control her through him.

"I'm so... It *wanted* them. The fucking Bug was just... Oh, god, it made me *sick*, the whole time..." Her soil-crusted fingers scrabbled at the thighs of her jeans.

"It's okay. Honest. Renewable resource. You throw *me* over the balcony, it might be different."

"*Don't say that*. Don't let it--" She clenched her hands on her knees.

He was pretty sure It had already thought about the possibility. He never worried about giving It ideas. It was always going to be better than him at that sort of thing.

"I'm the reason we can't have a cat," she said bitterly.

"No, we can't have a cat for the same reason as always: we don't know when we'll have to leave town." No. They couldn't have a cat because Chaz was terrified of what she might do to protect it from herself.

Her shoulders lurched and she hunched forward again, coughing on tears. Cautiously he touched her cropped hair, brushed his fingertips everywhere except over the scar on her scalp. The implant couldn't hold off the Bug by itself; they both knew that. Chaz tried not to be angry at the thing for letting the anomaly get to her. Just as he tried not to blame himself because he hadn't been here.

She leaned into him, and he put his arm around her, cupping the little plant in his other hand. She'd saved one. She'd saved the one she knew would mean the most to him, and she'd done it without help. She was getting better.

4.05 "aimforthe<3" - by Leah Bobet & Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Boston, MA, January 2012

The moment before their faces crumple is where the magic is.

"What do you mean?" she says, and she's Lucy: chin-length black hair, soft brown eyes, lips open just wide enough to let out one short breath. She'll feel like that breath was punched out of her. It'll move up through her chest and into her throat, leaving everything behind it shock-stiff and cold.

You met up with Lucy at a party: a Christmas event in Harvard Square. You leaned against a wrought-iron rail under mistletoe and cheap lights that swayed in the wind, and talked movies and politics together until last call. By the next Saturday you were spending more nights together than apart. By Thursday you had toothbrushes at each other's walk-up apartments. By Tuesday she didn't hesitate anymore when you reached out for her hand.

And now it's Friday again. Now it's time.

Her head's tilted just an inch to the left. You could take it in your hand, lean her face against your palm. Instead: "You're perfectly lovely," you say, hands carefully by your sides; body language kept far, far away. "But I'm just not feeling it, you know?"

Her arms wrap around herself, reflexive; holding that heat in. Holding in that thing she can feel ripping out of her, roots trailing. Holding in her soul.

"I'm sorry," you say, as if it's an afterthought.

And her eyes widen, and her mouth opens, and--

--there.

*

Washington, D.C., April 2012

Hafidha Gates was early for her lunch date. Even so, her date had beaten her there.

Virginia Greenwood sat at one of the outdoor tables, beside the black iron railing that divided the restaurant patio from the sidewalk. Her sherbet-orange shoulder bag filled her lap, and her arms folded tightly over it. Her gaze skittered over pedestrians, passing cars, the double doors leading inside. But since surveillance wasn't part of Ginny Greenwood's skill set, Hafidha spotted her first, before she could adjust her face or body language.

Scared, honey? But you're the one who invited me.

She resisted the temptation to sneak up from behind, because she really did want to know why Greenwood had called her and not, say, Reyes. Instead she angled herself into Greenwood's line of sight and smiled and waved, then cut into the restaurant and came out the patio doors.

"Professor Greenwood," she said. "Nice to see you again."

Greenwood had herself under wraps now, smiling, shaking hands. "Thank you for coming. I... I asked the waiter to bring appetizers right away."

Feed the jammer. She's got one in the family, after all. The ACTF had put poor little Susannah Greenwood in a pretty cell in Idlewood almost four years ago.

Sure enough, the waiter brought boiled edamame, spring rolls, a tray of sashimi, and miso soup. Hafidha popped a slab of oily-rich, bloodred tuna in her mouth while Greenwood said, "I'll have the vegetable tempura."

In Idlewood, no one was surprised at the amount anybody ate. Hafidha was a little spoiled now; she'd forgotten the glazed look the waitstaff got when she did things like order the tempura and the chef's choice nigiri for two and a few kinds of maki on the side. After the waiter had pressed his lips tight, written it all down, and left, she said to Greenwood, "Don't worry. We're going Dutch."

"No. I asked you to meet me. The least I can do is buy you lunch." But Greenwood was squeezing her purse again, and Hafidha didn't think it was to protect her wallet.

"You want to ask me something," Hafidha said, and claimed a spring roll.

Greenwood looked down at her empty plate. "My daughter--Susannah--she's making progress. She's young, and she doesn't have a history of psychological issues. Dr. Ramachandran says those things make her more responsive to behavioral therapy and emotional counseling than...than some of the patients."

"I don't know anything about her treatment plan--"

"She's a good candidate for the...the implants. According to Dr. Ramachandran." Greenwood lifted her gaze to meet Hafidha's and kept it there as if she'd fallen overboard and Hafidha were a lifeboat.

Deep Brain Stimulation. The chip in Hafidha's head. *Zap.* "You want to know what it's like."

Greenwood nodded and swallowed visibly. "It's not an easy decision. Oh, of course, you know that. But she's all we've got, and we're weighing the possibility of permanent loss of brain function against a cure--"

Hafidha must have done something to stop Greenwood in mid-breath. An expression, maybe, or a movement. "A cure? Did Dr. Casey say that?"

"You've been released, and gone back to your job..."

Hafidha speared a piece of yellowtail with her chopsticks and held it up admiringly. "A diabetic with an insulin pump is still diabetic." She nibbled the end off the raw fish and watched Greenwood for the moment when comprehension happened. Not until she saw it did she say, "Trust me, Professor. I'm still a monster," and suck the rest of the yellowtail into her mouth.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., April 2012

"Charles," Hafidha Gates said, and she was angry.

She was; not the Bug. Chaz Villette didn't need the mirror to tell the difference. There was a thin, bright viciousness in Hafidha's familiar brown eyes when the anomaly shoved its way forward, and today, hands crossed across her chest, chin tipped, glaring down at him in his desk chair, she was nothing but flat frustration.

Nicolette Lau quieted, just for a moment, at her desk. Reprocessed air blew through the bullpen up above: across Daphne Worth's empty workstation, and Solomon Todd's abandoned one.

Chaz tabbed away from the report he was stringing together, and took his hands off the keyboard.

"What's up?" he asked. Careful to keep his voice even and friendly. To not react to the sarcastic twist to Hafidha's mouth as if it were a shark fin broaching water.

"I can't," she said, deliberately, "find my picture."

Right, he thought, and sucked in his breath, and knew she saw his chest constrict. *The picture.*

They had all cleaned up Hafidha's office together, on a Monday afternoon: undoing three years' worth of dust and neglect, the kind that happened when no one quite wanted to open the door. The picture of Erik sat where she'd left it before leaving for North Dakota: in a black glittery plastic drugstore frame snugged next to her dead computer monitors. The glitter had long since fallen to the dusty desk and atrophied.

Chaz had weighed it in his hand, stared down at the face inside it, let the shock of its forgotten familiarity wash over him and away. He hadn't known what to do with the picture. That grief. That crack.

He'd looked up, and Falkner had been watching him, with the photo in his hand.

"Want me to take it?" she'd asked, and he shook his head. Walked it to his desk and put it in the bottom drawer.

Suspects did things when they were primed to remember the location of an object. He knew his eyes had flickered to that drawer handle. Lightning-fast. And back.

Chaz reached down and opened it. Felt through the papers, the spare socks, the nothings until the prickly picture frame came into his hand and he could lift it out. He wiped the dust off the cheap pane of glass. Erik Holt's face emerged, faded, smiling.

"I wasn't going to keep it," he started, awkwardly.

"Don't," Hafidha said. She held out her hand and took the thin black frame. Her fingers closed around it for a second, too tight. And then she turned and walked back to her office, Doc Martens squeaking softly across the institutional floor.

Lau did him the courtesy of not letting out her breath.

Chaz looked at her; got the standard-issue federal poker face in return. "Just say it," he said tiredly.

She snorted softly. "It wasn't a bad decision."

Chaz looked over at the door to Hafidha's lair, firmly shut. *Ostentatiously* shut. "It wasn't a good one." He paused. The air system droned on. "I didn't think she'd want to see it again."

Lau flipped hair out of her face, turned a crisp page. "Because she wouldn't want to? Or because if you were in her place *you* wouldn't want to?"

Profilers, he thought, ruefully. Rueful and not angry. Rueful and not bitter, and that spoke volumes all by itself, didn't it? "Yeah," he said when she

paused to look up at him. "Yes. Column A *and* B."

"I don't have to tell you," Lau said, and turned back to the file she was thumbing.

"You don't," he agreed. People coped in different ways. People wanted different things.

You could still be a good profiler, and mean well, and be a shitty friend.

Chaz leaned down and pushed his desk drawer shut.

When he sat up Esther Falkner was there in the door of her office, and who knew how long she'd been there? She gave him a small nod--nothing to say she'd overheard that little mess, but she wouldn't have tipped that hand anyway--and cleared her throat. "We're almost ready?"

"Yes'm." Lau turned the last page of the file she was going through, closed it, and held it up. "Briefing room, five minutes."

Falkner and Lau exchanged a look. Cast it, together, at the door of Hafidha's office.

"I'll go," Chaz said, and pushed out of his chair.

There was no latch on the door to Hafidha's Sanctum Sanctorum, but there might as well have been: that, two KEEP OUT signs, and a rope ladder pulled up as high as it would go. He tapped on the door with two knuckles. Again.

No response.

"Wabbit," he said through the crack between door and frame.

The answer was muffled by the thick wood door. "Not. Now."

"Wabbit," he repeated, and let out a breath. "We've got to work."

Hafidha yanked the door wide after a long moment, her face tight, lips pressed into one fat line. She brushed past him into the bullpen, strode long and lanky to the conference room without one look back.

Chaz shut the door behind her, behind him. Not before he saw the picture frame, face down, on her desk.

*

The photo of the girl was already on the briefing room screen when Chaz stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Beachside, a woman in her late twenties: light brown skin, bright eyes, a small and pointed chin. The classic young urbanite vacation picture: margarita in one hand, and the other arm wrapped around someone who had been cropped out of the picture. It was

unfair that every happy smile that crossed his desk inevitably belonged to a cadaver.

"So, this is Lucy Jones-Mercado," Lau said, nodding to him slightly. Hafidha was in the seat nearest the front. She did not turn his way. "She was found in her apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, three months ago. The local coroner confirmed ingestion of a whole extra-strength bottle of painkillers and no signs of a struggle."

"Suicide," Falkner said from the back corner of the room, and Lau nodded.

"Three weeks before, Lucy ended a relationship with a man her sister Tessie says she met on an online dating site. And said sister is alleging that Lucy was targeted and controlled in some way, because she never would have taken her own life otherwise."

Reyes straightened a barely perceptible half inch. "That's a common attitude with friends and family after a suicide. That it must have been someone else's fault."

"Sometimes it's true," Chaz said. "William Melchert-Dinkel was convicted in Minnesota last year for targeting people in chat rooms and encouraging suicide."

"Usually," Reyes replied curtly, "it's not."

Chaz glanced at him. Wondered who in Stephen Reyes's life had danced with a bottle of pills.

Not much time left to find out, now. The job posting for ACTF chief had gone up two weeks ago on the Bureau intranet, because federal law required open posting of jobs within the agency, even when the job description was necessarily incomplete and there was only one ideal applicant. He'd read it with a guilty fascination, and then five minutes later reality kicked in: Whether he was a good or bad parent, Dad was leaving the building.

"In this case, though," Lau put in, "she may have a point. Our White Collar Crime Unit's investigating said dating site for illegal acquisition and release of personal information. Apparently they've been data mining in places they didn't belong: credit reports, medical records, all sorts of wonderful stuff."

In front of Chaz, Brady blinked. "Why?"

Hafidha snorted. "I'll bet you five dollars it's for targeted ads."

Brady scowled. "Where'd we even get this?"

"Special Agent Pavelko of White Collar Crimes brought it to our attention," Falkner said.

Brady's face fell. "And you didn't make him do the class presentation himself?"

Falkner fixed Brady with an intense lack of expression which probably meant, *I don't know what you're talking about, but if I did I bet I'd disapprove.*

Hafidha clasped her fingers demurely in front of her. "It's fun to work with White Collar. They're *terrified* of us."

Brady shot her a grin, as if, just for a second, he'd forgotten what she was now. Chaz watched him; watched her. There were still flecks of a very human darkness behind her smile.

The sober dignity on Lau's face looked as if it was cloned from one of Falkner's expressions. *Mom in training,* Chaz thought. *Mini-Mom. If I said that out loud, she'd fill my desk drawers with rubber cement.* She said crisply, "Agent Pavelko has seen us in action, more or less. Sol consulted on the Tampa pyramid scammer case, which was why the agents in the field knew they had to open fire on Drummond."

Hafidha's lower lip stuck out like a cash register drawer. "White Collar hates the shooty bits."

"The point," Falkner said, stepping up to herd the cats, "is that Pavelko is aware of our brief. When he reviewed Jones-Mercado's death, he thought it was suggestive. He gave it to us to evaluate."

"Lucy's sister claims that the site must have leaked certain pieces of information--their mother's death a year ago, Lucy's treatment for depression after that--that marked her as a target for a predator. And they did have that information when White Collar seized their servers. And apparently," Lau paused, "Tessie Jones-Mercado has been *extremely* insistent on her story."

"So we got it because they don't do murder," Brady said.

"And because I bet they don't have the first idea how it was done," Hafidha replied.

"If it was done," Falkner added. "We need to stay with the chain of evidence here. 'If' is going to be our big question."

"Which means we don't have an official invitation," Lau said. "Special Agent Pavelko's vouched for us to Boston PD, but as far as they're concerned, it's an open-and-shut suicide. There's no crime."

"Go Fish," Reyes murmured, and she nodded.

"Everything White Collar gave us is in the files," Lau said, and Chaz flipped his open: a basic stats sheet, age and build and job description. That photo

again, clipped to it, of a pretty dead girl, smiling. A small sheaf of correspondence between White Collar's liaison agent and the pretty dead girl's sister, which was only small, he realized, because it was double-sided.

A printout, not unlike the stats sheet, of Lucy Jones-Mercado's online dating profile.

Falkner stood. "All right. Lau, Hafidha, Brady, Villette: We're heading to Boston once the jet's ready for us."

Hafidha stood up--*reflex*; stopped, and blinked.

Chaz didn't need the mirror to double take right with her.

Falkner looked around the cramped room; quirked an eyebrow at the fully shocked Hafidha Gates. "I hope you didn't think you could stop packing a go bag," she said, not unkindly, and strode efficiently out of the room.

*

Esther Falkner tapped on Reyes's open door and let herself in without waiting. He was perched behind his desk like a graying gargoyle, one hand on the keyboard and the other pinning paper down against his standing fan's roaming breeze.

"All set," Falkner said, heels together, still ingrained with the habits of crisp speaking, crisp living even after years out of the military. "We're going wheels up in half an hour."

Reyes brushed away a stack of paper like specks of dandruff. It scattered white across his desk. Retirement apparently involved paperwork: reams and stacks of it. All notarized. "And you're bringing Hafidha," he said.

"It's the kind of case where she'd be useful on the ground," Falkner said carefully, and Reyes just nodded.

He looked tired. Falkner supposed it had been a long time since he had looked anything less than tired, but it had been better concealed, once. *He's made the decision,* she thought, grimly. *And now there's nothing left to pretend for.*

She loosened her posture slightly. Rubbed the old ache in her back. "How are the girls?"

Reyes leaned back with a long, thin sigh. "Settling in. Amber's starting at Georgetown in the summer semester. And Autumn--" His fingers strayed to the bridge of his nose.

"And Autumn," she repeated, gently.

"I've never had to find an elementary school for a beta with the mind of a

thirty-year-old," he said, and raised a weary eyebrow. "I'd homeschool her myself, but socialization is important. It's especially important, given her first few years. And the kind of school she needs? You thought heart transplants had a long waiting list."

"Montessori? Waldorf?"

"Both," he said.

Falkner tucked herself into one of the once-plush, now just functional chairs opposite. *Right.* Three marriages come and gone, but Stephen Reyes had never once been a father.

The stakes were always the highest when it was a child placed in your hands: all the responsibility for who, what, how they were going to be, sitting every day in your throat. But it was worse when they'd already been hurt.

It was worse when they had the capacity, already, to do unspeakable harm.

"We went through this with Deborah," Falkner said carefully. Remembering that cautious kid who alternated like clockwork between greedy, enthusiastic affection and pulling all the way back into a shell that was much too hard, too young. "She was in two schools before she settled into this one."

Reyes leaned forward, steepled his fingers. "What did you do?"

Argued with administrators. Sat in on classes. Applied for transfers. Did exhaustive research, night after night, on where in a small, high-income school district there might be resources for a shy and traumatized kid. "Everything we had to," she said, "to find her a safe place. But not so safe that she'd never learn to build her own safety."

Reyes regarded her for a long moment. Nodded, slowly. "I don't know why I thought this might ever be easy."

"I'm sorry," Falkner said. "It's never going to be easy again."

He snorted, sharp and dry. "So Kay keeps telling me," he said, and straightened up. "We'll be at the ready once you're on the ground."

"Thanks," she said, and meant it. "I'll check in when we land."

"No, it's your show," Reyes said, and Falkner caught his eye. She tucked her head in acknowledgment, and walked the U-turn loop out his door and into her own, darkened office.

Her go bag was underneath the desk, tucked trimly behind the footrest she'd had to put in last year. She tugged it out in three practiced jerks. *Your show.*

"It is nothing," she told herself, quiet and firm, "compared to a child."

Falkner hefted her go bag onto her shoulder. If she hurried, there was just enough time to call Ben and the girls before she left, so she could tell them, once again, that she loved them.

Act II

Boston, MA, April 2012

"Hi," he says, and softly, uncertainly, smiles.

He's tall, skinny, balding in a way that dips down the sides of his crown and which he's tried to hide with buzzed-short hair. New blue jeans; a checked shirt open casually over a ribbed white tee. The folds in it are too crisp: It's the illusion of carelessness at work. The illusion that means he cares all too much.

First-date jitters. The smell, faint and unmistakable, of someone who really, really wants this.

You vault yourself up from the wall where you're leaning: brick, half-height, surrounding a park next to the coffee shop where you'd said you two would meet. Peer at him. Shuffle your feet once, deliberate.

"Brad?" you ask, and beam your brightest, happiest smile. "Hi."

*

The Boston field office curved tall and red-brick bright through the center of downtown, one bridge and a tangle of streets away from Logan Airport. Lau uncurled from the backseat of the Bureau's motor pool car and stretched the cramps out of her legs. She knew better than to sit behind Chaz Villette. Even for fifteen minutes.

She had spent the thirty minutes before takeoff on a few quick phone calls, and here were the results: a stocky, brown-skinned, navy-suited field office agent, regulation haircut and regulation shoes, awaiting them at the front desk, her posture one of casual attention. She straightened as they approached; took Lau's hand.

"S. A. Kim Bollinger," the field office agent said. Her handshake was strong and professional: one of the top five things they taught you in Unofficial Law Enforcement School for Women. Lau returned it in kind: an assertive squeeze and a smile. "I'll be your tour guide."

Lau felt her polite smile widen. "We'll try to be good sightseers. Sorry for the short notice."

Bollinger gave a little shrug; a fractional relaxation. "Crime fighting doesn't wait on us," she said, and offered that hand to Falkner.

"I did a little more background on your possible victim," Bollinger said, leading them through halls and past cubicles that looked about as different from city to city as the local IHOP. "Ms. Jones-Mercado was a bit of a go-getter: worked in the IT department at Boston U., and was active in a few volunteer organizations. She was taking salsa dancing."

Lau nodded. Falkner shot an inquiring glance her way. "Salsa lessons are to singles what soccer is to moms," she explained.

"Ah," Falkner replied, with a little chuckle. "I always knew I was a bad mother. I put them in softball."

"Football," Brady added.

"All I got was rowing," Hafidha put in dryly.

"In the Pacific. Poor baby," Lau said. Hafidha was cracking jokes again. That was a good sign.

Lau deliberately didn't turn to gauge Chaz's reaction. Nobody liked a busybody. Or at least a busybody who wasn't courteous enough to pretend to cover their tracks.

Bollinger stopped at yet another anonymous wood door, and pushed it open. "Here's your home base," she said.

The Boston field office had followed the whole rider: conference room, dedicated internet access, a whiteboard, and coffee on the boil--more than enough, for a unit flying in on a few hours' notice, with no official invitation from local law enforcement. Table, PowerBars, whiteboard markers lined up on the ledge below the wide blank board. Every room Lau had ever worked from, in every city.

"Thanks," Lau said, and dropped her bag onto the first chair.

Bollinger lingered beside the door. "I also took the liberty of calling up Tessie Jones-Mercado. I assumed you'd like an in-person interview."

Lau caught Falkner's quirked eyebrow: the *Oh?* model, and not the *You have disappointed me very much.* "That's helpful," Falkner said, mild and professional. "When's she available?"

"She's here now," Bollinger replied. "Interview Room Two."

Falkner glanced at Lau. She nodded, and pressed two hands down the front of her regulation Woman in Law Enforcement black suit. "Just let me get a coffee first," she said.

*

Tessie Jones-Mercado didn't seem to have minded the waiting. She perched straight-backed on an interview room chair with a half-full, lipstick-stained cup of coffee within reach, and she had brought a box.

Falkner glanced over the jumble visible inside: a bright blue wallet with a big-eyed anime something on the fold. A tiny, disoriented school of crocheted sharks, with magnets glued inexpertly to the bottoms. A darkened, deactivated smartphone. Framed photographs.

Lucy Jones-Mercado's things. Her leftovers.

"I'm Agent Falkner," she said, holding out a professional hand. "This is Agent Lau. Thanks for being willing to come in on such short notice."

"You've come to talk about Lucy," she said, flat as the gray table, the gray walls. Restraint, Falkner decided. Restraint so she didn't appear too eager. Restraint in case the FBI agents weren't actually here to help.

"We have," she replied, and slid gratefully into the chair opposite.

Lau followed suit, resting her arms gently on the table. "We've read your correspondence with Special Agent Pavelko, but we'd like to hear the whole thing from you."

The flat defenses in Tessie's eyes wavered. "Lucy always--she took things harder than me. We both got picked on in school, racist mixie come-be-my-nanny bullshit." Tessie's hands closed, briefly, around the corners of the box. "But she took things harder. So she took it worse when mom died."

"And that was last year?" Lau said, quietly. "Yeah," Tessie answered, and for a moment she looked the tiniest bit lost. "A year and three weeks."

"What did Lucy do?" Falkner asked in her most encouraging, active-listening voice.

Tessie sighed; her shoulders came down. Her hands held on to that box like it was a parachute. "Went nose-diving into her own life. Started volunteering at this canning group. Took dance lessons. She was always talking about how busy she was, all these things she was involved in. But," she said, and looked up, and there was a glint of something sad in her eye, "there was always this edge to it, y'know?"

Lau nodded. Falkner reminded herself again of how many months it had been since Nikki Lau's father had died; how many volunteer hours she'd racked up since at that women's shelter, or the progress of the carefully covered circles under her eyes. How many push-ups little Esther Falkner had learned to do the month her Bubbie Yetta had passed away.

There was a kind of busy you forced yourself to stay so you didn't stop, or

think. So the despair at your back never had a chance to catch up.

"And that didn't change until she met this Brian guy. Brian Casey. She was happy," Tessie said, and the echo of a dead woman's bewilderment leaked through into her voice. "That's the thing I don't get: It was only a few weeks, but she was so happy again. Just deep down, quietly. She was finally starting to think that maybe the other shoe wasn't going to drop this time."

"And then he left," Lau said.

Tessie nodded. "She said he said he wasn't feeling it or something, some bullshit reason. And I thought, okay, asshole doesn't know what he wants. He jumped in too fast and dragged her with him, and then he sits up, looks around, and freaks out. And then I found the toothbrush, and the stuff he gave her, and the text messages..."

She reached into the box and lifted the smartphone out. Set it on the table. "He was texting her every day. Talking like *when* she met his parents, not *if*. After a whole week." Reached in, took out the card from a florist's shop. "And that's when I got thinking: What if this wasn't just some asshole not knowing what he wants? What if it was one of those sick bastards who picks out people who are depressed and pushes them over the edge?"

Out came the pictures: Lucy's familiar bob haircut on a ballroom floor. Holding up a wineglass in what looked like Faneuil Hall. Candid snaps of a happy woman. But the person she was with must have been on the other side of the lens.

"And that," she said, "started to make more and more sense."

Tessie Jones-Mercado, Falkner admitted to herself, would have a bright future as a trial lawyer if she ever wanted it. She had the presentation skills *down*. She unpacked the box slowly, ending two-handed with the last thing: a white, slim laptop, charger plugged in and coiled on the lid.

"Her laptop?" Lau said. Her ears visibly perked.

"I took it to a friend who's good with computers," Tessie said. "We read all the e-mails they sent each other. But the stuff on the dating site we can't get."

"If you'll consent," Lau said, "we have someone on staff who can access Lucy's files on the offsite servers with the laptop. It would go a long way to helping us reconstruct what may have led to her state of mind."

Tessie still needed to work on the courtroom poker face: Falkner watched her grasp onto their interest, hang up on the word *may*, think about being insulted, and come right back to hope again. "You can have it," she said, sharp and quick.

"I'll draw up the paperwork," Lau said, and ducked out of the room. Practically dancing, if you knew what to look for.

"Tessie," Falkner said, not at all professionally now, "no matter what happens with this? I want you to know that you should be really proud of yourself. You've been the best advocate your sister could have had. The best sister."

All that sharpness and poise wavered for a minute, and then crumpled like a missile crater. "Thanks," she said, barely audible; chin tucked so suddenly behind her hair that Falkner had to look for the moving of her lips. "I-- Thank you."

Falkner swallowed. "We'll be in touch," she said, and left Tessie Jones-Mercado to her box, and her grief.

*

It turned out Hafidha's hands could forget things, given enough time and not enough practice. She hadn't even finished setting up her rig when Nikki Lau came back through the conference room door, scanning like a searchlight. "Any idea where Bollinger got to?"

"Sorry," Brady said, busy with a squeaky green whiteboard marker. "Your interview get all uncooperative on you?"

"Got super-cooperative," Lau said smugly. "She brought the entire contents of Lucy's desk and wallet, including her cell phone and laptop."

"Jackpot," Chaz said, wrestling with a map of the city of Boston and environs on the other side of the table. The map was winning this round. Hafidha tried not to cheer it on. "If it's still got her receipts, I can narrow down what neighborhood he might have lived in."

"Unless he paid," Brady added.

"Unless he paid," Chaz acknowledged. Hafidha untangled her monitor cords, combed through them with long fingers until she hit a snag, and swore.

"Need a hand?" Chaz said. The room went abruptly quiet. She connected laptop to dock, dock to monitor, and said absolutely nothing.

Brady glanced at them sidelong. Lau didn't move. "I'll get Bollinger," Chaz said, thin and closed, and left the room.

Hafidha stabbed the power button with one finger. The laptop whirred moodily. Both of her monitors flickered to life.

"Hey," Brady said, capping his whiteboard pen. "We need to chat about anything?"

Fifteen answers snarled through her head, each worse than the last. Hafidha reached back, rubbed her scalp. Pretended she could feel the chip embedded somewhere deep below. "I'm still allowed to get mad," she said, and slammed her computer cases shut.

Brady obviously agreed. Because he most intelligently left her alone.

I want sugar, she decided. *Chocolate. Caramel. Bad, bad tooth-destroying substances.* She could send Brady to fetch. Was he supposed to stay and keep an eye on her? Brady didn't know the good stuff from a damned Hershey bar, probably.

"Be right back!" she called, and whisked out the door before he could make a discussion of it.

She could find a break room by following her nose, but she needed a vending machine. Would they be in the same place?

Before she had time to decide if accessing the building floor plan was a violation of the terms of her parole, she spotted Bollinger walking toward her down the long gray aisle between gray cubicles.

"Can I help you... I'm sorry, I don't remember your name."

"I'm Special Agent Hafidha Gates, Special Agent Bollinger. My, we're all so special."

Bollinger's eyelids fluttered, which might be a sign of surprise. "Now I'm really sorry. I hadn't realized you were an agent."

"What didn't tip you off? That I dress too well, or that I get to play with the really good toys?"

Bollinger's grin flashed out. "I'd say the boots were my first nonclue."

Hafidha looked admiringly down at her mid-calf black patent Docs. "They ought to be standard issue. Engineered for kicking ass. Not that I will be doing that here."

"You don't think this case will pan out, then?"

It was Hafidha's turn to be startled. "What? Oh, no. There's a bad man out there, and we'll find him if we have to live in your conference room till the end of time. But I'm not allowed near asses with my kicking boots on at the moment."

Bollinger studied her while trying to pretend otherwise. Hafidha realized she'd posed the nice Fibbie an insoluble puzzle. Administrative leave? Suspension? No, or Hafidha wouldn't be in the field.

She relented. "I need a large quantity of good chocolate. Preferably with other sugary substances mixed in."

Bollinger lit up all over. "I don't know about the boots, but around here that's a crime-fighting essential, girl. I've got a box of my sister's homemade chocolate almond toffee in my desk. Will that do?"

"Lead the way, Very Special Agent."

Bollinger's sister knew her way around a candy thermometer. Hafidha crunched down on her second piece of toffee as Bollinger said, "So you don't think this was suicide."

"I'm sure it was suicide. I also think somebody messed so hard with Miss Lucy's little head that she couldn't help herself."

Bollinger sighed. "Proving it will be a bitch."

"Depends on whether he did it the old-fashioned way, or if he just stuck his nasty fingers in her brain and stirred."

"I'm...not following that at all," Bollinger admitted.

I think I'm making her nervous. Hafidha licked chocolate off her fingers and tried to decide how she felt about that. At the very least it was a lousy return for the candy.

That was when Chaz found her. He had a sheaf of receipts in his hand and a hitch in his breathing, and Hafidha thought he was showing a bit more white around the eyes than usual.

"Ooops!" she chirped. "Time to get back on my treadmill. Thanks for the yummies!" She slid past Chaz at the cubicle entrance and swept back to the conference room.

Chaz came in two minutes later with Bollinger. *Did you grill her about me, Platypussy?* His face was neutral, professional. She couldn't even guess at his composure.

Deep in her head, the Bug giggled.

"Thing is," he was saying to Bollinger, to whoever, "I don't understand why Jones-Mercado would be a target. I mean, it seems like she was out there, doing things she enjoyed, all the usual advice. And she sounds like a catch."

"The problem with this city," Bollinger answered dryly, "is that everyone's a catch."

Lau snorted--and that wry edge to Bollinger's smile surely wasn't just imagination. Hafidha glanced down, surreptitiously, the way you learned to

after a few years of being terminally single: no wedding ring. "L.A.'s like that," Lau said. "The town that invented the model/actress/whatever."

And now Bollinger was doing the glance: to trim, accomplished, gorgeous Nikki Lau's bare ring finger.

Lau caught it. Of course she did, but she wasn't the sort to get her shorts in a knot about that, or to show it. "Agent Bollinger, where d'you keep your property forms?" she asked instead, and Bollinger beckoned her down the hall. Chaz trailed after them like Linus's blanket.

Doesn't want to be in the room with you.

Shut it, she thought right back. Hafidha massaged her own fingers, joint by joint--around chunky plastic rings, nail polish about to chip--and logged into her mobile office. "What do we want first?" she asked cheerfully, instead of all the other things moving through her head like eels. "Victimology, or straight to our possible gamma?"

"Not sure how we'll get to either," Brady said. "The problem is, White Collar seized the whole company. Everything that even beeped. It's all offline now. No getting to those profiles without an interdepartmental request and a three-page book report on what kind of airplanes we plan to fold the printouts into."

Hafidha shot him an amused glance. "Baby, that isn't even work," she said. "If we can't go to that server, we'll go right around it. There'll be footprints all over the place."

"In official records?" Brady crinkled up his forehead. "Nobody actually gets 'broken heart' on their death certificate unless they're in *Little Women*."

Hafidha resisted the urge to stick out her tongue at a professional colleague. "Nobody dies from falling, either. It's landing that's the problem." He snorted. "Sadness doesn't leave much of a paper trail," she added, "but even *try* to commit suicide and there's bureaucracy all over your shit."

"That, then," he said. "We'll start with pulling hospital records."

Hafidha flicked open her browser with the bat of one eyelash. "And may I just say that sadness leaves a trail of ones and zeros all over the place? The Internet is one big damn Lonely Hearts Club."

Brady waved a hand: *fine, fine*. "How do we cut our gamma out of that herd?"

Hafidha laced her fingers together and stretched them lazily. "Oh, you leave that to me, my pretty."

But of course it wasn't as easy as she pretended. Pretty colors didn't pop every time gamma fingers hit keys. If her prey wasn't using his superpower on the

Internet, she was screwed.

Except she wasn't.

She knew how it felt, the soul-dead-in-the-body sensation. She knew how the pit opened up, kept opening as you fell, so there was never any bottom, just less and less light. Until you forgot what light looked like.

Fear, physical pain, sorrow, anger, those were tasty Bug-snacks, and it wouldn't turn them down. But that black despair was its true, perfect food. She knew it from the inside.

That's what she was looking for.

Chaz shouldered back into the conference room, balancing a tray of hot coffee. Hafidha reached out for one without speaking; drained half the mug in one long swallow. Put her fingers on the keys.

Death records, autopsy filings, hospital admissions. Cross-referenced with credit-card billing for X-Seeking-Y personals in the free weeklies, membership dues in singles clubs, and yes, online dating sites that served the greater Boston area. Which was all of them. Bollinger was right; this town was full of people who, anywhere else, would have a date for every Saturday night from now until world's end, and here were just part of the sparkly shoal of fishies.

She tried to think about what she was doing the way a real person would: Information was either relevant or not, available or unavailable, connected to another fact or a dead end. But the data itself was a delicious immersion, nourishment and environment and indulgence all at once. She could strain that data through her gamma teeth and taste the misery-flavor she was hunting for.

You're in a Fibbie conference room in Boston. Don't go all supervillain now.

Or ever, ever, but you could only swear to one day at a time, to now, because saying you'd never be bad again was like promising to dig up your backyard with a spoon, and you'd get one square foot done and fall off the wagon in despair. *Just do the job. Worry about being evil on your own time.*

And there, shining on her laptop screen, were three names.

Hafidha pushed back from the table a smidge and announced, "Rhonda Castellano. Admitted to the ER six months ago, attempted suicide. Neighbor smelled gas walking by her apartment door. She lived, though. Elizabeth Kline. Arrested for reckless endangerment when she walked into the street in front of a taxi. And Pavel Breslov, law student at the Big H, who drove his motorcycle into a tree. Blood alcohol level of point-oh-nine, but he told the medics he meant to do it, and to leave him alone. Smashed his pelvis all to hell."

Lau spoke up from where she hunched over the property forms. "And they're all--"

"Lonely Hearts Club. Castellano had signed up with Precious Yoke, which ought to be about B 'n' D, but is in reality a Christian online dating service. Kline subscribed to StrikeAMatch, a site so admirably open-minded they almost scare *me*. And Breslov was listed with New In Town, which does both social and romantic meetups."

"Three very different sites," Falkner observed.

Brady made a tiny growly sound in his throat. "Three very different victims. Not likely they're all ours, is it?"

Lau dropped the forms in a wire basket beside her. "Let's go ask."

*

Rhonda Castellano had short, dark, curly hair, olive skin, and enormous hazel eyes that widened even farther when Falkner and Lau introduced themselves and mentioned that ER visit. From the way her thin fingers clutched the frame of her apartment door, the Bureau might have been a division of Hell, Incorporated.

"May we come in?" Falkner asked, and Lau had to admire the way she projected confidence in spite of clear signs of Will Not Cooperate.

"No." Castellano shook her head, as if the word might be misconstrued. "I'm sorry. It's not something I'm comfortable talking about."

Lau shifted slightly, emphasized the contrast between Falkner's military authority and her own lack of it. *Hard cop, soft cop.* "Ms. Castellano, we understand how painful this is for you. But we're trying to find someone who may have caused a woman to take her own life, and who may be targeting others."

"Despair is a sin, Miss..."

"Agent Lau."

"If you despair, you're doubting God. I sinned, but He stretched out his hand and rescued me. That's all anybody needs to know."

God, your neighbor, and the paramedics, Lau thought irritably, but kept it off her face. Humans were usually how miracles got done. "You were a client of an online dating site at the time of your hospitalization."

Castellano's lips pressed together, bleached with the pressure. "What I did had nothing to do with anyone else. I made a mistake, but I was saved to become a better Christian. I'm trying."

Falkner tipped her head lower--a recognition of virtue, and a gentle admonishment. Lau would have bet Falkner's daughters could recognize that head tilt. "You may have information that could help us save lives, Ms. Castellano. You're not in any trouble. You won't be called on to testify..."

But as Falkner spoke, Castellano's head swung slowly back and forth. "I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do for you." She didn't wait for a response. She just stepped back and closed the door. They could hear the safety chain slide home.

They walked all the way down the stairs and out the building door, into soft light and the scent of the narcissus ranked along the pavement, before Lau said, "This is me not commenting on other people's religious beliefs."

Falkner seemed to be studying something in the middle distance. "She's internalized the blame for what happened. Not just the suicide attempt--whatever prompted it, as well."

"She tried to kill herself because she was a bad person." Lau let out a low whistle before she could stifle it, but Falkner didn't seem to think it was an inappropriate reaction.

"If her faith can convince her otherwise..."

Lau shook off the gloom that threatened to fall on them. "Let's see if our next person of interest gives us treats."

*

Pavel Breslov used a cane.

He used it to walk, now, and he used it as a crutch: Even sitting, he grasped for it the moment Brady and Villette showed their badges at his office door. Blond hair fell untidily across his pale, sharp-boned face in what was, nonetheless, a professional and expensive haircut. *Not taking care of yourself anymore*, Brady noted, and pocketed the badge. "Might we speak with you a moment?"

Breslov blinked rapidly. Straightened up, his hand hard on the cane. "Officers, do you have a warrant?"

Brady bit back the *should I get one?* just in time. Jumpy as a squirrel, he decided. No, as a white-collar embezzler.

"Mr. Breslov, we're hoping to speak to you as a witness," Chaz said soothingly, and dammit, it was gonna be his day to be Bad Cop again.

"What is this regarding?"

"A possible identity fraud case. It may have led to a young woman's suicide."

Brady watched the skin stretched over Breslov's architectural face go white, then red.

"I don't think I know... That does not sound familiar."

"You probably didn't know the woman in question," Brady said, sneaking a little self-satisfied drawl into his voice. "We believe you may have met the con artist, though."

"I will help, of course. If I can. Please, come sit, and close the door."

Brady imagined this was an archetypal Ivy League T. A.'s office. It barely held Breslov's desk and chair, a pair of metal folding chairs for guests, and a cheap MDF bookcase with sagging shelves. It would have looked bigger if Breslov had ever returned a book or a piece of paper to wherever it belonged. Also, from the smell, Breslov ate half a tuna salad sandwich for lunch three days ago, threw the other half out, and hadn't emptied his trash can since then.

Brady dropped onto the metal chair as if it were an oak church pew. The chair whimpered, and Breslov winced. "From the way you're using that cane, you must be in a world of hurt. What happened?"

"I had an accident with my motorcycle." In spite of the pain, he said it proudly. *I ride a motorcycle.*

"Those things'll kill ya," Brady said, and Breslov paled and flushed again.

Chaz didn't frighten his chair, or their host. Yet. "Mr. Breslov, you joined an online dating site not long before your accident."

Brady didn't think Breslov's face could have closed harder. It must have had storm shutters tucked away somewhere. His hand tightened around that cane like it was a shotgun. "Not a dating site. It was for meeting friends. Maybe going to a ball game, or to find a workout partner. Just for making friends."

Brady cocked his head. "Did you make any?"

"No." Breslov met his eyes and looked down. "Not really."

Chaz looked thoughtful. "I'd have thought you'd meet lots of people here on campus. You must work with interesting people."

"I was new to the city. The department is competitive. I was looking to make friends." There was a crackle to his voice that Brady recognized, and it had nothing to do with a new town, or not being able to bond over study group.

This was not going to go well.

Breslov shot a sudden, pleading glance at Brady. It said, *You wouldn't know how it is. Put yourself in my place.* But that wasn't a place Brady wanted to

visit again. "Pavel, we need you to help us, as a witness. We think you met the guy we're looking for. If you can give us his name, his address, phone number, where he liked to hang out, anything you remember about him, we might be able to keep him from hurting anyone else."

Breslov perked up at the use of his first name, but the rest of the speech brought the shutters back out. "I didn't meet anyone. I didn't find anyone who was built to be a good friend for me. That's all."

"That's all," Brady echoed.

"And when you told the paramedics at the scene of your crash that you meant to hit the tree, and they should just let you die?" Chaz said quietly.

The kid was getting awfully good at this.

But Breslov just changed color again. "I think it's time for you to leave."

Brady leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. "Pavel, what will we find if we get a search warrant for your dating site records?"

As soon as the sentence was out of his mouth, Breslov's face did something that told him he'd fucked up. "Agents, I am a law student. To get a search warrant, you must show probable cause of evidence in a crime. What crime will you cite?"

After that, there really was nothing to do but leave.

"He's lying," Chaz said, as they paced through the hall, down the stairs, to the door that led back to campus parking.

"Thank you, Great Detective," Brady said, and pushed the door wide open.

"He's ashamed," Chaz added.

Brady snorted. "Well, yeah. You know why they keep saying gay men go into interior design?"

"Will I be sorry if I bite, here?"

"Because we've seen the inside of enough closets to last a lifetime," Brady said. "Our boy there spent that whole interview denying he had anything like a feeling for our UNSUB and I don't think his eyeballs moved once from my ass."

"You were sitting down."

"Then he was *imagining* my ass."

"More than that, though," Chaz said. "It's about being rejected. Everybody's been shot down, but nobody likes to talk about it. It makes them feel--" he

paused, hopped onto a curbside planter to dodge someone's front bumper and dropped down to the asphalt, "--vulnerable. Unloved."

"I don't get rejected," Brady said blandly, and sauntered around to the driver's side.

"Mm-hmm," Chaz replied, and opened the passenger door of the black SUV.

*

"His name was Mike," said Elizabeth Kline. "Mike Darrow."

She was small and pretty in a rounded Victorian way, with nearly colorless skin that flushed with every change of emotion and dense tawny-red hair. In her straight back and edge-of-chair perch, Falkner saw a woman determined to watch life's worst moments come at her and not blink.

And yes, she was expecting the worst.

"We met at a museum for our first date. I thought that was...perfect. Maybe that was my first warning, huh?"

"Why so?" Falkner asked.

"There's no such thing as perfect. And if you do meet someone who's perfect--well, why is he hanging around with you?"

"You don't think you deserve a perfect guy?" Lau spoke quietly, gently, as if she were trying to talk a feral cat out from under a house.

Kline sighed slow and deep. "You know I was arrested, right?"

Falkner nodded.

"Probably saved my life. I thought Mike was wonderful. And when he broke it off--the things he said, it seemed like he was still wonderful, but he'd realized the truth, that I wasn't. I could have had wonderful, but I wasn't good enough to keep it. I was just... I felt like a *stain*. On his life, on the planet."

"So you stepped out in front of a taxi," Falkner said, so Kline wouldn't have to.

But Kline met her eyes. "I can't believe I didn't *think*. I hurt so much it was all about me, and I didn't think about the driver or the passenger."

"When you broke up, did Mike mention hurting yourself, or suicide?"

Kline leaned back, putting her maybe an inch farther away from them. "No! He was nice about it. Which made it ten times worse, you know? Like even then, he was being such a sweet guy."

Lau clasped her hands in her lap. "Why are you glad you were arrested?"

"I got probation, and the court ordered me to get counseling. I've been in group therapy for eight months. Sometimes I still feel like I'm not worth anything, but when it happens, I've got things I can do, people to call. I'm getting better."

"Did Mike ever talk to you about other people he'd dated?" Lau asked.

Kline shook her head. "It sounded as if I was the first person he'd ever been serious about."

"Do you have his address or phone number?"

"I did. But the number was disconnected, and when I went to his place, his name was off the mailbox and nobody answered the bell."

Single life in the big city--it was so easy to appear and disappear, and the neighbors wouldn't remember who'd lived next door.

"If you can find his old phone number and address, we might be able to use them." Falkner looked around the room, at the untidy, overstuffed bookshelves and the bright slipcovers and the lamps from Ikea. "Do you have a photograph of Mike?"

Kline frowned down at her kneecaps. "I'm not sure. I had a bunch on my computer, but I deleted... No, I know where I have one." She sprang to her feet, as if they'd given her energy by asking, and hurried out of the room toward the back of the apartment.

"I think," Lau said softly as they waited, "that I'd kind of like to beat this guy with a two-by-four."

Falkner thought she wouldn't mind doing it, either, but it wouldn't do anyone any good to say so. "We still have no evidence of a crime."

"Inciting people to suicide is a felony."

"But he didn't do that, as far as we know."

Kline came back with a sheet of photo paper and a one-gig thumb drive. "You can keep the stick; we buy them by the gross at work. Here's his picture."

The man Elizabeth Kline knew as Mike Darrow stood close beside Kline; one arm circled her back and cupped her opposite elbow, supporting it. He was maybe six-two, towering next to Kline, with brown hair flying in cheerful disarray around his forehead and ears. His face was smooth-shaven and lightly tanned, his eyes were clear, and his wide mouth was parted to show straight white teeth. His extreme slenderness made his cheekbones melodramatic and his fingers scalpel-sharp.

He was smiling, *beaming* into the camera, proud and happy, while Kline held a full-grown Canada goose in her arms.

"We volunteered doing wildlife rescue," Kline said, looking down at the print. "We got to release that one back into the wild. That photo was in a folder that... I just really loved doing that."

The man she called Mike looked as if he loved it, too. As if he loved her.

"You know that thing people say? 'It's not you, it's me?' It doesn't matter. What matters is that happily-ever-after just died. Whose *fault* it is doesn't change how that feels." Kline twisted her hands together. "You think Mike is the guy you're looking for. That he's done this to other people, not just me."

Falkner weighed the look in Kline's eyes, the tension in her shoulders. "We do. The person we're looking for may have hurt a lot of people, including a woman who committed suicide."

Kline shut her eyes; for the first time since they'd arrived, she didn't want to see. But she said, "That could have been me. I don't understand, though. Why would he do that? He didn't want money..."

Falkner watched Kline struggle with the idea, and knew she couldn't tell her, *He just wanted you to hurt.* "We won't know until we talk to him." Falkner slipped her card out of her pocket and laid it on the coffee table in front of Kline. "If you think of anything else that might help us find Mike, call me, please. Day or night."

"I will. But everything we did, or talked about... I mean, we liked to go to used book stores. But maybe he only did that because that was what would make me love him. How do I know what will help?

Lau's voice sounded tight in her throat when she answered, "You let us worry about that."

*

"Jeremiah Brown." Hafidha snapped her fingers idly at the printer in the corner of the conference room, and it coughed to life.

"That sounds like a bourbon." Brady half-turned where he stood at the coffee maker. He'd made a straight line to it as soon as he'd come in, as if he needed to get the taste of something else out of his mouth. Chaz was still somewhere out in the offices. Hunting and gathering, Hafidha hoped. She didn't need to talk to him to take a donut out of his hand.

"It's another potential victim, Bubba-man."

Brady padded over and picked up the pages as the printer spat them out:

printouts of a driver's license, LinkedIn profile, home address. And then the dating site, complete with pictures of a young black man with a tipped bowler hat.

"Oh ho. This is not a just-friends kind of site."

"Ah, no." She blinked forward in Brown's records. "Oh, hell. We won't be interviewing Jeremiah. Took him off life support last week."

They shared a moment of silence for a man they'd never met, and hadn't heard of five minutes ago. Dying really wrecked the mood of a room.

"Our guy's definitely playing for both teams, then." Brady said, thoughtfully. "There's a nasty kind of logic to that."

Hafidha looked up at him. Quirked her eyebrow. "If you say 'predatory bisexual,' I'm going to go looking for where the pod people stored your *real* body."

Chaz banged the conference room door open with his hip; his arms were full of bags with tasty-looking grease stains on them. Hafidha smelled pasta and garlic and something seafood-y and resisted the urge to just *reach*.

Brady snorted and waved her off with one big hand. "It's like a rape profile," he said, ruffling the pages. "The payoff here has nothing to do with sex or who he likes to sleep with. This is all about power and pain."

Chaz winced, faintly. "Which means we throw out race, gender, orientation. He's aiming for the widest victim pool he can get." He plunked the packages down on the conference table, too hard for the health and welfare of tasty soft contents. The look on his face was readable in fifteen languages, plus Braille: *This is going to suck.*

"Targets of opportunity," Brady said thoughtfully, and drummed his fingers on the table. "But he's selecting them somehow."

Chaz picked open a greasy paper bag and lifted a warm takeout container from its clutches. The smell of delicious fresh, hot things redoubled. Hafidha's stomach growled. "How do you feel about a breakup?" Chaz said.

Brady shrugged. "Depends on the breakup."

"Miserable? Relieved? Angry? Helpless? Offended?"

"Any or all of the above?"

"But all our victims feel the same way," Chaz said. His long fingers laid out plastic forks, plastic knives, plastic cups. "Devastated. Crushed. None of them are healthily pissed off. Why is that?"

Hafidha's voice sounded like a cracked bell in her own ears. "Because anger doesn't hurt enough." Two heads turned. She swallowed, and went on: "Because the point is maximum damage. So he's picking targets based on whether he can do *that much damage* by walking away. He's picking targets entirely because they're not healthy."

Silence puddled in the room like leftover grease.

"Dating's all about building profiles," Brady said. "That's why every piece of stupid first-date advice in the world gets repeated: Don't talk about your exes, because it makes people think you're not over them. Don't drink, because they'll think you're a cheap lay. Don't dress too sexy, same. Everything you do on a first date is a profiling countermeasure. It's a short trip down the road to looking for people who apologize for their own damn opinions and take every kindness you give them as proof of a loving God."

"Where did you even *get* all that?" Chaz asked.

Brady blinked, blandly. "*Cosmo*."

"Good Lord," Chaz said, and went looking for the napkins.

Hafidha took off her glasses; rubbed the bridge of her nose between two fingers. Her stomach hurt. Her rewired cyborg brain hurt. Whatever she had for a soul hurt. "I'm not the only one who can go hunting for the sad online. He's your store-brand, generic-ass, cheap-shit abuser. All he wants is people who're gonna respond when he kicks. And because we all tell ourselves this story about true love where you know it when you see it, and if you think it's something else, you were fooling yourself, or stupid, or wrong, he just goes from victim to victim."

"And they blame themselves," Chaz said, quietly.

"And they don't talk," Brady added.

Hafidha let out a breath. The thing in her head boiled over and hissed: *Filthy world. Filthy people. Wipe his ass off the map.*

"I need," she said, to no one in particular, "something to eat."

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C.

Reyes knew who was at his office door without looking up. That was the knuckle-rap of a superior on formal visitation, one who preferred to be the destination and not the traveler in the hallways. Well, impending retirement had its perks as well as its obligations. This time Celentano could afford to come to Reyes. And Reyes could afford to be nice about it.

"Come in," he called across his layers of sorted files.

Celentano stepped in, smiling genially under the glare of the fluorescents off his bullet-head scalp. "You know, if you change your mind and stay, you won't have to finish all that paperwork."

"Have a seat and watch me suffer." Reyes waved him toward a chair. Falkner had sat in it last, to have a conversation nothing like this one. He hadn't had to look cheerful for Esther. "Did you come to say you'll miss me?"

Celentano lifted his chin, square under the softness creeping up on his jaw and neck. "Since when do I have to say it out loud? You created this job. No one can do it like you."

Which was probably a relief for Celentano. "Victor, I hope that's not true for all our sakes."

The chair creaked as he settled into it. Under the light veiling of chin and belly fat, Celentano still had a lot of hard, heavy muscle. "If you're really worried, don't retire yet."

Reyes had a new job, and there really was no one else who could do it. The ACTF had been part of his apprenticeship for it. "I'm not worried. Esther Falkner could have taken over any time in the last three years without a hitch. If she turned it down today, Lau or Brady could run the show; they've got the authority and the experience to make it work."

"So your legacy is safe," Celentano said, smiling.

"Maybe safer. You trust them. You'd hesitate to pull the plug on them."

Celentano's foursquare seated posture, with his feet flat on the carpet and his hands braced on his thighs, said more than the bland arrangement of his face.

So Reyes went on, because his boss had not, in spite of himself, pretended to ignore that last speech, bid him a happy retirement, and left. "I know Falkner was tasked with holding my leash. I know Nikki Lau was under orders *not* to release certain information when acting as liaison to law enforcement and the public, even when that information could help apprehend suspects. In spite of the limitations they've had to work under, they've committed everything they had to the job, and performed beyond what could be expected of any six ordinary agents. They'll accomplish as much or more than I did, and they'll spend less time fighting with you. I'd say we both win."

Celentano held Reyes's gaze for a long breath, in and out. Then Reyes saw his neck muscles relax, and his fingers stretch and loosen on his legs. "You and I only seriously disagreed on one position."

"I could hand you files from these stacks with names in them of people who

would be alive if we had been able to release information about the anomaly."

"And I can't show you the reports on the deaths of people caused by the misunderstanding and misuse of that information. Because there aren't any."

"If we hadn't intervened in Tennessee, you'd have had a report on Patricia MacIntyre. And it would have been the result of too little information, not too much."

"You think I should judge policy on the basis of its implementation by one hick deputy sheriff?"

Reyes leaned back hard in his chair; it smacked the wallboard behind him. "Do you believe that's why we're keeping everyone in the dark? Because there'll be a panic? Is that the only reason why shit will rain down on us if we have a press conference?"

Victor Celentano had perfect control of his expression and his voice when he said, "I have my orders, Stephen. The people who give them to me have their reasons."

Reyes felt he was allowed the exasperated exhale; he was retiring, after all. "I'm still an agent of the FBI, and I'm still faithful to the job, the chain of command, and the safety of the nation. So in service to all that, I'll make you one last big speech. Get out in front of this, Victor. Go public about the ACTF and what it does, and make it clear to the world that this is a public safety issue we're *already handling*. The facts about the anomaly are going to come out. The myths will be hard on their heels. Once that happens, you'll never catch up. If you don't control the release of the information, it will control you."

Celentano nodded--*thank you for your input*--and rose. It was a surprisingly smooth action for such a big man, one who couldn't be too many years from retirement himself. "Good luck, Stephen. And don't be a stranger."

Oh, I won't, Reyes thought behind a blank face. *I most decidedly will not.*

Act III

Boston, Massachusetts

It's warm for April; doubly warm beneath your tangled cotton sheets. Good warmth; soft as the breath you let out against the back of his stubbly neck, and the way its humidity splashes back at you, full of another person's smell.

"You're so damn sweet," he says, soft and sweaty and glowing. Not just from the sex; with a half-smile on his face that you've seen so many times before.

You pitch your voice just right: happiness and awkwardness and wonder. "I didn't exactly plan on this," you say, all rushing hesitation. *I'm not just a dog. I was swept up. You're just too incredible.*

"Neither did I," he replies, not turning. Plants a lazy kiss on the join between your wrist and hand.

"We should get some sleep," you say. Say without saying, *I am not kicking you out.*

Stay. Stay as long as you want to.

You feel the short exhale through his back, against your stomach, when he smiles. The first little tendrils of affection, safety, trust sprouting from wherever inside we keep our breakable hearts.

The second you care about something, you're opening up your belly; you're fusing their body to yours, side by side, on the most tenuous of joins. And all the naturalness of reaching for their hand, or their hip bumping yours and staying, doesn't make up for the fact that when that join's ripped apart your guts will be wide open. Exposed to the stinging air. Falling to the floor.

What most people don't understand is that the second you care about something, truly care about it, you die.

"And done," you murmur to yourself, with a rising, piqued satisfaction.

"Hm?" he asks. Perfectly sleepy. Perfectly content, balled up with his knees to your knees; his back warm against the curve of your chest, your stomach.

"Nothing," you say, and wrap him in your arms.

*

"Here," Nikki Lau said, slapping a printout of a photograph on the table, "is our guy. Maybe."

Hafidha looked up from her mess of destroyed lobster fettuccine. "Maybe?"

"Probably," Lau said, and pushed the picture toward her.

It was a tall man, white, broad-shouldered, curly dark hair just messy enough to be wildly charming. Straight nose. Big friendly grin. The kind you'd see on a dating site and wonder how in the Good Lord's name he was still single. "Figures," Hafidha muttered.

Lau raised an eyebrow.

"It's always the hot ones who are possessed by brain-eating evil," she said. "And yes, I am including me."

Lau didn't flinch. She loved how much Lau didn't flinch.

The Bug hated it.

Falkner and Brady stepped into the conference room as Lau pulled the photo back. "Elizabeth Kline said his name is Mike Darrow. At least, for her."

Hafidha rolled her chair back to the laptop. "Aaaand I'm finding his profile on StrikeAMatch. Oh, look here: 'Somewhere out there is the person I'm meant for. I want to banish her sorrows and shelter her with love.' When we find him, can I puke on him?"

"Can you find him in meatspace?" Lau was twitching like a greyhound with a stuffed bunny just beyond her nose.

The profile was archived; the linked credit card was dead. But she knew some of his on-line tells now, and could start worming back to an ISP, previous or current. "On it."

Chaz stood at her right hand; she had no idea where he'd come from. He set a foam clamshell on the desk beside her laptop and opened it. Not one, but two cannoli.

"Those'll come in handy."

Falkner picked up the photo of Mr. Lying Liar Who Lies. "Meanwhile, Brady, Lau, go back to Breslov and Castellano. Show them this and see if it jogs their memories."

*

Rhonda Castellano seemed stern and self-possessed, defending her apartment doorway with her body. Until Lau held up the photo.

Her grip on the door frame slipped, and her hand rose to press against her mouth. Keeping in physically the words she didn't want out in the world.

"You know him."

Castellano just stared at the photo.

"Rhonda. You dated him, didn't you? Then he broke it off. And the way he did it made you feel like no one could love you. That was when you tried to kill yourself, wasn't it?"

Somewhere in the apartment behind Castellano, music was playing. A woman sang, sweetly, inoffensively, though Lau couldn't make out the lyrics. The singer got through what sounded like a whole verse, and Lau's hopes for the interview were melting like summer hail.

"His name is...Adam. Adam Bonaventure. He said--" Castellano swallowed,

made a glottal sound, swallowed again. "He said he couldn't be with someone who...who loved him more than she loved Christ."

By the time she finished the sentence, her voice was faint and frail as a deathbed confession.

*

When Brady showed the photo to Pavel Breslov, it snapped the girders in his face. The whole structure collapsed on itself, and he turned his back on Brady.

"I guess this means you did meet someone through that Internet site," Brady said, but it came out gentler than it had sounded in his head. "Why did you lie to us, Mr. Breslov?"

Breslov ignored him. Fair enough; it was a dumb question.

"Will you tell me now what you know about the man in the photograph?'

"Hugh Morgan." Breslov's voice was tight and unsteady. "What you want to find him for. This fraud and a woman dead. He would never do something like that. He was honest even when it wasn't good for him. We found a wallet once with money in it, and he took it back into the restaurant so they would call the man who lost it. He worried all night about that man he didn't know."

After enough years on the job, some statements gave you a *feeling*. "Where did you find the wallet?"

Breslov slumped into his chair, but he was at least willing to look at Brady now. "In the parking lot, by the car. We had dinner. I found it when we came out."

"His car? He drove?"

Breslov frowned, confused. "Yes."

Fussing with getting the car keys back in a jacket pocket in a dark parking lot... "Was there ID in the wallet? Do you remember the name?"

"A driver's license? I didn't see one. I think...there was an airline card, for miles, you know. And I think the name was like the one, the railway engineer in the song."

Not John Henry, damn it, who-- "Casey Jones?"

The thing that moved Breslov's mouth almost counted as a smile. "Casey. I think it was."

Brian Casey was the name of Lucy Jones-Mercado's demon lover.

*

Lau and Brady came into the conference room together, with Bollinger close behind. Hafidha searched their faces and found the mixture of gotcha and disappointment in their species that meant Breslov and/or Castellano had had a change of story.

"Looks like our boy's name should be Legion," Brady said, and sank into a chair.

Lau laid a page of notes on the conference table and veered off toward the coffeepot. "He was Brian Casey to Lucy Jones-Mercado, and Elizabeth Kline insisted his name was Mike Darrow. To Pavel Breslov, he was Hugh Morgan. And Rhonda Castellano knew him as Adam Bonaventure."

"Hugh Morgan," Hafidha said, and brushed through layers of encryption like they were her hippie mother's beaded kitchen curtain. The profile flickered onto both screens. "Apparently a cocky fucker who does not shut his burned identities down."

"Or knows enough to realize that might tip his marks off after the fact," Bollinger added, and Hafidha tilted her a nod: point, the local kid.

She pried the locks loose on Hugh Morgan's on-site inbox and rifled through it one-handed. Whistled low through her teeth. "Look at all the people he messages," Hafidha said. "There are dozens of them. Ten a day on this site alone. And most of them, he never tries to meet."

Brady huffed. "We were right: He's screening. He's looking for anyone breakable."

She skimmed; stopped. Stopped hard. "Oh, God. 'As much as I wanted to continue our conversation, I was let down by the "tell me about yourself." It's a question I dread hearing in interviews and shows the other party was too lazy or boring to construct a real one. It is late and not that I know you well but from what I read thus far, I know you can do better; call it tough love but I'll give you another chance for creative questions.'"

"You're kidding me," Falkner said.

"I wish," Hafidha spat. "And the worst? She answered."

"Set him," Chaz added, "on fire."

"Is this that Game thing?" Bollinger said icily. "Insult the woman you're trying to pick up and see if she comes back anyway?"

"Or he," Brady added. "That's a universal test for not actually liking yourself enough."

"It's Go Fish," Chaz said, brooding. "The same way everyone else does online

dating. Why does that disappoint me?"

"Because it makes finding out where he is now that much harder," Lau said, and leaned over Hafidha's shoulder in a way that only halfway made her want to snap at the air. "Who else has he been talking to?"

Hafidha yanked up the cluster of dating sites she'd been incubating in her bookmarks file. "This guy has *hundreds* of online profiles. Not just on the dating sites--he has backup web presence for all those identities." Hafidha rubbed her too-short hair and huffed out a breath. "Blogs, Facebook, Goodreads--hell, they all have Amazon wish lists."

"But they're all him?" Falkner asked. "You can identify them?"

She nodded. "They're all the same IP address, and some of the same pictures. He's not hiding from law enforcement. He's hiding from his victims-to-be."

"And we still can't find him in meatspace," Bollinger growled. "Dating sites are designed to be just anonymous enough. They don't even ask for proof of identification."

"Which brings up a point," Falkner said. "Lucy Jones-Mercado died three months ago. If these profiles have been active since, we are probably on a clock right now."

Chaz's breath hissed out. "Right. Regular, repeating trail of victims. There's a new one. Someone he's working on right now."

"And probably one we've missed," Brady added grimly.

Falkner was hoarse when she said, "Check any new activity on the identities we've got. Maybe we can get ahead of him."

She'd already begun to scoop that data. But there was no reason to think he'd be using one of the profiles she'd spotted so far. Even if they lucked out, they'd only have one of his fake selves by the tail.

"Oh, screw this," Hafidha said, and wiped one screen blank with a swipe of her hand. Reached out the better way, her way.

Photos, numbers, data flowed through her head. Flickered on the screen like an afterimage aquarium. Went careening through the cable between monitors, through her left brain and her right, matching up names and addresses and pictures and sorting them away.

Far away, over her shoulder, she heard Brady's voice say, "Agent Bollinger, will you show me what you have on-site for surveillance gear?"

Oh, right. Don't blow our cover. Now Brady puts on his shades and hits her with the neuralyzer.

It didn't matter. What mattered was the data stream. Push it. Sieve it. Quicker.

"What's that?" Chaz said quietly.

"Massachusetts DMV," she snapped, and leaned in harder. DMV, and library cards, and loyalty cards, and everything else in the world. The photos scrolled faster, her left hand spidering for dummy profiles, snatching and matching them with every piece of ID that bore Evil Romeo's face. Took every hit and threw it right out.

You're gonna burn out, the Bug whispered. She gritted her teeth and moved faster.

Until there was one.

One piece of ID that didn't match up with an online piece of bait. One state driver's license with no Amazon, no LinkedIn, no thinly veiled Twitter account leaving a bright deadly trail for whoever was guaranteed to find it.

"His name," she said, "is Drew Pennicuik." The arm of the chair dug in under her rib cage on the right side. She should sit up straight, maybe. "And he lives in Somerville."

The printer sputtered. Spit out a tiny sheaf of pages: Drew Pennicuik's license, photos, 2011 tax return. "Onward, Keystone Kops," she said, and grabbed the armrests of the chair with both hands. The room seemed too far away for her to be inside it.

Lau made a noise like someone's disapproving mother. "Dammit," she said. "Food."

"Food," Hafidha agreed; caught the edge of Lau's shoes bolting out the door in search of Boston field office's finest and closest leftovers.

"You all right?" Chaz said quietly. She waved him away. He hovered for another second before stepping back, somewhere out of view. Before Lau came back in with a double handful of protein bars and unwrapped one in a shower of crinkling foil wrapper.

"I got this," she said, and pressed it into Hafidha's hand.

Falkner was by the printer, looking over their spoils. "This is close in. We might be able to catch him at home."

"Suit up, then?" Brady asked, with a thoroughly unprofessional eagerness. Hafidha put the protein bar in her mouth and bit. Tried to not think about it too hard, or too much.

"We'll go in soft. He doesn't get his hands dirty. Brady and Chaz in front, and I'll grab some of the locals to back you up. Lau, get an interview room ready

for us."

Brady nodded and went out the door. Probably to find Bollinger and some vests.

"Right," Falkner said, brisker than your average drill sergeant. "Let's bring him in."

Act IV

You've just sent him the text when the doorbell rings: *Hey, is it okay if we grab a coffee tomorrow?* Grab a coffee; not your place, not mine. Hesitant. Stripped of endearments.

He'll already know something's wrong.

The door goes again, followed by a hard triple knock. Impatient, you think, irritable, sharp. Someone selling something. Someone you don't want. You peek through the peephole at the two men outside. You've never seen either before.

You open the door with your smile fixed in place: bored and terribly charming. "Can I help you?"

"Special Agent Daniel Brady, FBI," the tall blond thing says, all shapes and textures to your eyes: here a half-masked discomfort with his masculinity; there the hangnail handhold of a vicious, lashing privacy, years of keeping secrets and the terror of having them revealed.

The angular one next to him is harder. You stare a moment too long, prying around for focus: Everything about him is bright and blank and hard. "Special Agent Charles Villette," he says crisply, and you give up. Not worth it. Apple too high up the tree. "Mr. Drew Pennicuik?"

You smile at them both: bewildered, bemused, affable. "Yes, that's me."

"We need you," the big one says tightly, "to come with us."

*

Interview Room One was the classic cop-shop model: one door, no window, a table bolted to the floor with a discreet but sturdy bar beneath the tabletop where a shackle could be threaded, two flimsy stacking chairs. All it lacked was the one-way glass, but a video camera in each corner corrected for the shortage.

Drew Pennicuik wasn't shackled; at least, not beyond the restraints of the room itself, which were mostly psychological. Even those didn't seem to weigh on him. He sat at the table with the bored patience of someone waiting

for his number to be called at the Motor Vehicles Division.

Brady gave voice to what Falkner was thinking. "Innocent guys in interview rooms are not relaxed."

Pennicuik was, strictly speaking, innocent of a crime, at least as far as they were aware to date. But it took a deep-seated ruthlessness to face the justice system and not squirm, even a little, at the memory of a red light run, a fence tagged, an act of trespassing or minor theft or property damage.

"He doesn't know about us," Lau said suddenly, staring at the center monitor.

Falkner turned to look at her, drawn by the *aha* in her voice, and saw that the rest of the team had turned, as well.

Hafidha finished Lau's thought. "Cops look for motive. He thinks he's safe, because why would anyone do what he does? But we know why."

Falkner considered Hafidha's half-focused expression and half-dreaming tone. Chaz, she saw, was considering it, too. How much incentive did he need to use the mirror? Which side would he err on?

She trusted him to judge, because she had to. "Villette, I want you to question Pennicuik."

Chaz blinked. "My, ah, particular brand of evidence isn't admissible."

"You don't need to use that--not yet, at least. I want to see how he reacts when he finds out we know what he does. That he's not the only one."

*

They watched the monitors as Chaz came through the single door, an unmarked manila folder under his arm. Pennicuik gave him a single swift evaluating look. Then he raised his eyebrows and smiled, and lifted his hands a little above the table surface with the palms halfway to up. Universal gesture of question and supplication.

"Am I under arrest for something?"

Falkner wondered what Pennicuik had seen when Chaz came in. She knew too much to see Chaz as other than he was. But had Pennicuik seen the competent, relentless professional, or the awkward, wounded feral child? And which had Chaz wanted him to see?

"No, Mr. Pennicuik." Chaz sat in the chair across the table, centered the closed folder in front of him. "But we are engaged in an investigation you might be able to help us with."

"Sure." Maybe Pennicuik relaxed, but it was hard to tell.

"You use a number of online dating sites, correct?" When Pennicuik only frowned and tucked his chin, Chaz continued. "StrikeAMatch. Heart to Heart. Precious Yoke. New In Town. Date Nite. Randy's Place." He rattled them off, ostentatious in his lack of anything like a list to refer to. "And quite a few more."

Hafidha had found twenty-six sites so far, and over two hundred personal profiles.

A muscle twitched in Pennicuik's jaw. He wasn't much thinner than he should have been, even given the width of his shoulders. Did he *have* a manifestation? He didn't seem to use one to get what he wanted. If he weren't noticeably underweight, she'd wonder if it was possible to feed the anomaly and never ask anything of it.

Anthropomorphizing. Reyes would say the metaphors block the view of the real thing.

"That's private," Pennicuik snapped. Chin up and thrusting in righteous outrage. "There's no law against signing up at multiple sites."

Chaz grabbed the advantage he'd been given. "As I said, Mr. Pennicuik, you're not under arrest. I notice none of your memberships use your own name."

"Those sites can attract scammers and creeps. It makes sense to be careful, at least at first."

"You're worried about identity theft."

"Among other things, yeah."

"Other things?"

"People who are searching for intimacy can be very vulnerable, Agent..."

Chaz's smile was small and slow. "So to protect yourself, you used pseudonyms. Adam Bonaventure. Mike Darrow. Hugh Morgan. Brian Casey. But why so *many*?"

To Falkner's surprise, Pennicuik blushed. "Sometimes... Agent, maybe you wouldn't understand this. But you don't always...want the same things all the time. It's easier, sometimes, to just pretend to be somebody else than it is to find one person who can give you everything you want."

At the other end of the row of monitors, Hafidha gave a short, angry twitch, and Falkner recalled Hafidha's last romantic relationship.

Chaz didn't react at all. "And what is that?"

"Pardon?"

"What you want. From these sites."

"I really don't think that's any of your business."

Chaz leaned forward confidingly. If he was doing anything *anomalous* it didn't show up on the monitors. "Humor me, Mr. Pennicuik, please. This will help our investigation."

Pennicuik's face softened; his eyes widened and focused somewhere past Chaz's shoulder. "I want...a real connection. It sounds hokey, but I want true love." He laughed, and sounded nervous and embarrassed. "Man, I hope you're not taping this. I meant it, but that doesn't make it sound less like a greeting card, you know?"

"Is that what you were looking for with Lucy Jones-Mercado?" At last Chaz opened the folder and slid a photo across the table to Pennicuik. "She knew you as Brian Casey."

Pennicuik stared down at the photo and nodded. "She was awfully sweet."

"But the connection wasn't there."

"You can't force it to happen."

"Did you and she ever discuss suicide?'

Pennicuik reared back in his chair, lip curled. "What, like a...a pact?"

"Did you ever say anything to her about suicide?"

"Why the hell would I? And how did we get from falling in love to, to suicide?"

"That was the progression for Ms. Jones-Mercado."

Pennicuik's face was fixed and blank. "Lucy killed herself?"

Chaz slid the photo back into his folder. "You didn't know Lucy Jones-Mercado committed suicide?"

"No. After we broke it off, I never saw her again. There wasn't any point." Pennicuik seemed baffled that he had to explain it.

Chaz thumbed another photo out of the folder and pushed it toward Pennicuik. "What about Jeremiah Brown?"

Pennicuik shot Chaz a quick sideways glance. *Looking for judgment,* Falkner realized. *Revulsion, disapproval.* He didn't see any, of course, so he allowed his face to soften as he looked down at the photo. "Jer and I--"

Falkner could almost hear the click as Pennicuik matched the previous subject

to this one.

"Wait. Did Jer... Him, too?"

"Him, too, what?" Chaz sounded genuinely confused, but Falkner knew he wasn't.

Not like Pennicuik. *He hadn't known.*

"Goddamn," Pennicuik breathed, staring down at the photos. "They killed themselves. Goddamn."

It might have looked and sounded like regret to other people. But with a deep dismay Esther Falkner heard newborn wonder beneath those words. In the instant before Pennicuik schooled it away, she saw his expression: *avid.*

Chaz caught it, too. "Mr. Pennicuik, I'm sorry to have misled you. We know why you created so many profiles on so many dating sites, and why you chose the people you did."

"I told you--"

"You have an illness. You're not the only one who has it. It makes you want to hurt people."

Pennicuik sat with his mouth open for a moment. "That's... Excuse me? If I have some kind of psychosis, I'll get diagnosed by a doctor, not a glorified beat cop."

"There are physical symptoms, as well. You have trouble keeping weight on, don't you? No matter how much you eat. And you eat a lot." Chaz stretched his own bone-sculpture hands in front of him. "That gets worse over time. Eventually the metabolic stresses lead to chronic organ failure. Dialysis is a turnoff for a lot of dates, I hear."

"You can't prove a word of this," Pennicuik growled.

"I don't need to. You already know I'm telling the truth. You couldn't always feel other people's pain the way you do now. It didn't always feel so very good. To someone else this would sound crazy. But to you and me, it makes sense. Doesn't it?"

Pennicuik's fingers closed around the table's edge, and the knuckles were white.

Chaz leaned in across the table, so kind and confiding that Falkner half expected him to touch the other man. "Drew, you're not controlling this. It's controlling you. And it'll kill you quick if you don't know what to do about it. But we can save your life. Let us help."

Falkner felt light-headed; she realized it was because she was holding her breath. Pennicuik's handsome features twitched with one aborted expression after another: fear, outrage, anger, lust. He would break. He had to. The only life Pennicuik cared about was his own. He would do anything to save it.

He had to surrender. He *had* to.

Drew Pennicuik shoved himself back from the table, making the chair screech along the floor. His voice shook as he said, "I have no fucking idea what you're trying to do. Charge me with something or let me out of here." He folded his arms across his chest.

Chaz took his time getting out of his chair, tucking his folder under his elbow, and walking out of the room.

"Jesus fuck a truck," Brady muttered fiercely. Lau slumped and raked both hands through her hair. Hafidha sat staring at Pennicuik in the monitors, opening and closing her hands.

When Chaz came in, his first words were, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Hafidha burst out, then bit her lower lip and turned away.

"You almost had him," Falkner said. "It was a good strategy. He just couldn't be sold."

"So, what do we do now?" Brady asked.

"There's not much we can do," Falkner said. "Mental cruelty is grounds for many things, but not, last I heard, an FBI investigation."

Brady leaned across the table. "We can't walk away. That guy in there? That's a gamma."

"One who hasn't committed a crime. Even if I thought we *should* lock people up because they might break the law, there's no practical mechanism for doing it."

"But think of the best part, kids," said Hafidha suddenly, bright and brittle as chrome plastic. "We just showed him how to level up."

Esther Falkner could keep her face immobile under trying circumstances. She kept it still now, in spite of the pain in her throat. She watched Chaz.

"Hafs?" Lau frowned. "We what?"

"He didn't know about the suicides," Chaz answered. He could have been a recording. "As soon as he heard about them, he *wanted* them."

"And it's just that easy, boys and girls." Hafidha smiled at Lau, at Brady, and finally at Chaz. Chaz stared back, but he looked away first.

"No," Lau snapped. "No, no, no. We can't let him walk."

"We can't charge him." The words seared Falkner's throat.

"Fuck this," Brady spat out. "We stick these motherfuckers in Idlewood like it's Guantanamo for gammas, and nobody kicks. It's where he belongs." He flushed and turned to Hafidha. "Sorry. Present company and all."

"No problem, sugar cookie." She seemed almost pleased.

Falkner clenched her hands on each other, because she was afraid if she closed them on anything else she'd break it. "We belong to the Justice Department. That still means something. And maybe Celentano or the assistant director or the director or someone else up the chain of command would be prepared to whittle away a little more of that integrity. But don't ask it of me."

Lau turned back to the monitors where Pennicuik's image sat, impatient but unperturbed. Brady's face was closed and dark. Hafidha drummed her fingers on her knee, back and forth, back and forth, in some indecipherable rhythm. Chaz stared at the gray commercial carpet as if he could read it.

Falkner pushed her chair away from the monitors and stood. "We can't hold him," she said, surprised at how calm she sounded. "Let's turn him loose."

"Great." The word was an explosion from Hafidha's mouth. Her lips curled as if she'd bit down on an aspirin. "We can be home before the cherry blossoms are done."

Falkner spread her hands on the back of her chair and leaned forward, watching Hafidha across the four-pane flat-panel window of the lit monitors. "Do you have a suggestion?"

Hafidha's face worked for a second more, a wrestling match between expressions or lack thereof. Suddenly she covered it all with her hands. Falkner had never seen her do that before in just that way, and she sent a question-glance at Chaz. All his attention was on Hafidha.

"I just don't have to *like* it. All right? I could wash the bastard out of the Internet like the itsy-bitsy fucking spider because it's the thing I'm *made for,* but I'm not going to. And I'm not fucking *happy* about it." Hafidha's breath sucked past her teeth and hit the back of her throat, an audible blow. Her fingers curled as if reaching for her eye sockets.

A water cooler stood in the corner by the door. Falkner filled a paper cup with water and set it on the table in front of Hafidha.

"Fuck you," she groaned without taking her hands away from her face.

"You wouldn't like that, either," Falkner replied, mild as milk.

Hafidha dropped her hands, picked up the cup, and drained it.

*

Chaz had said, "Set him on fire," and he'd meant it. Looking now at Hafidha's shaking hands and set jaw, he wanted something worse than fire. She'd forged herself a chain to contain the Bug, and that was the right thing to do. But he wanted to destroy the person who was making her throw her weight against the links.

He knew how that felt. He'd had a real chain, after all.

He scrabbled in his head for something to say, something she wouldn't fling back at him. After all, if Pennicuik had caved, she wouldn't have to hurt. He'd failed her.

He touched three fingers to the top of her wrist. A turn of her hand, and her wrist wasn't there anymore.

Falkner straightened slowly, as if her back needed consideration. A muscle jumped in her jaw. "All right. Nikki, would you bring Agent Bollinger in here, please? I'd like her to be up to speed on this."

Lau flicked a glance around the room, and Chaz knew what she was looking for: *Anyone know what "this" is?* Chaz couldn't help her, either. She slipped out the door.

Brady stood up and stretched. "I'll book us a ride to the hotel from the motor pool."

"No," said Falkner. "I want you here, too."

"For...?"

Maybe Brady would have had an answer. But Lau ushered Bollinger into the observation room and closed the door.

"Thank you, Agent. I'll be back in a minute." And Falkner left the room.

They were interrupted in their universal exchange of *What the fuck* expressions by movement on the monitors.

Falkner walked empty-handed into Interview Room One.

Pennicuik tipped his head to one side and gave her an undisguised once-over. Could he see through Falkner's highly refined stone face? No way to tell from his reaction.

Falkner didn't sit down. "Mr. Pennicuik. I'm Supervisory Special Agent Esther

Falkner of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force. I'd like to thank you for coming in today. In a few minutes someone will come to escort you out of the building. Before you go, I'm going to share some information you should know."

Pennicuik donned a politely curious expression. But he didn't reply. *He's off balance. He has no clue what's next,* Chaz thought. *Hey, join the club.*

"We know who you are, where you are, and what you are, Mr. Pennicuik. We will never lose track of you. That's the job of Anomalous Crimes: to recognize and monitor people like you."

Pennicuik's teeth worked behind his lips. No, it wasn't just the freaky-looking skinny guy who thought there was something wrong with him. The woman who might be able to kill him with a paper clip was on board with it, too.

Falkner continued. "We have the list of your identities online. If you create more, we will know them before you stop typing. We know your methods and your preferences. Should you resort to even more dangerous behaviors, like inciting to suicide, well, we call that 'escalation.' We'll know about that, too. And your first criminal act will be your last.

"If you're careful and use your...talents as little as possible, you may live to see fifty. I should warn you, that's not the way to bet. Not without help. But as long as you're a law-abiding citizen and a *very good person,* Mr. Pennicuik, you will never see us again. And that's the way you want it."

Esther Falkner turned with military precision and left the room.

Pennicuik stared after her, at the shut door, for a long moment. Then his head swiveled, his eyes at once searching and blank. He clasped his hands on the tabletop and lowered his gaze at last. Maybe he was looking for a sign that he was the exception to everything.

It was Bollinger who broke the silence in the observation room. "What did she mean, that bit about talents? What makes this guy special, and what kind of special do you folks track down?"

Hafidha was still staring into the monitors, not quite focusing. Chaz didn't want to take his eyes off her. So he was grateful when Nikki Lau drew a long breath and said, "Agent Bollinger, I'm going to tell you as much as I'm allowed to." At the corner of his vision, Chaz saw her glance back at the monitors and straighten her shoulders. *Not unlike Mom.* "And then I'll tell you a little bit more."

Falkner came in as Lau was leading Bollinger out. If they exchanged anything significant, Chaz missed it. "Brady," Falkner said, "you can call the motor pool now."

Hafidha swiveled her chair and gazed up at Falkner. "Es. Thank you." Calm face, cracked voice.

Chaz owed her a thank-you, too. He'd get it out later, when he didn't have to force it past the truckload of jealous.

*

Hafidha was supposed to be packing up her rig. Disconnecting cables. Breaking her prosthetic senses, her Voltron, down.

It wasn't enough.

She wanted to *hurt* him.

She paced the small washroom one more time. Somewhere, deep in the bowels of the FBI, specially trained agents were wondering exactly *how long* it took that twitchy girl to pee. Her shoes landed with an echoing thump; good acoustics. Bathroom acoustics.

Prison cell acoustics.

"You are not," she said to the thing inside her head, "going to do anything about this."

It doesn't have to be now. It doesn't have to be here.

And on the back trail: *Crazy girl talking to herself in bathrooms.*

"I said I didn't have to like it," she told it bitterly, and turned on the faucets on both the sinks, to drown out the noise of her muttering through the crack in the locked washroom door. The intangible pressure in her head shifted. Satisfied. Damn.

You also wanted to wipe him right off the Internet. Wipe it clean.

"I was wrong," she told it. Her hands on the side of the white chipped sink wavered.

He was wrong, the Bug snipped.

"Well, there's more than enough damn wrong to go around, isn't there?" she told it, and shut off the tap. If James Singh had been willing to say, "I was wrong," and live with the consequences, Daphne would be beside her. Cracking wise about how technically heartbreak had nothing to do with the circulatory system. Breathing, messy-haired. Alive.

But living with the consequences was always the bitch part, wasn't it?

Right. She was a peace officer. She was there to enforce the peace; to reduce harm.

There was more than one way to reduce harm in this situation.

*

Hafidha strode into the conference room, jaw set, and put her fingers on the keyboard keys.

Chaz's chin clicked up from the files, maps, debris he was packing away like a safety coming off. "What're you doing?"

"Looking something up," she snapped back. Her hands flew over the keys, hunting through snags and tangles of Internet traffic: of those hundreds of dating site profiles, one of them would have been active most recently. One of them would have a blot of messages exchanged, and a meeting time, and a place. One more twist of colors, visible across the cables, of someone lonely enough to die.

Peace officers weren't supposed to avenge. They weren't supposed to murder. But they could find them some law-abiding citizens and move them right out of the way.

Dating sites were designed to be anonymous. And Brady had called for the car, and there wasn't much time. She had to be quick.

"Hafs?" Chaz said, tightly.

"Everything all right there?" Brady asked from the corner.

She opened the door in her head and let the numbers flood in.

--and there. There.

Bradley McClellan, thirty years of age, a journeyman carpenter living in Burlington, Massachusetts. License and registration; a tug sideways to address; somewhere, somewhere in that thicket, a working phone number--

She saw the mirror go up.

There was supposed to be no telling when Chaz was jamming; no telling if he was pointing it at *you*. But she'd been under the microscope enough to see it: the afterimages of her every emotion registering on his face nanoseconds after they leapt onto hers. Surprise. Violation. Betrayal.

Chaz's face abruptly twisted: purest outrage.

Hafidha stood up hard; knocked the chair back spinning and careening across the carpet. Sound, light crackled in her ears: the snapped strands of data fading out. "Chaz," she said, "Turn. That. OFF."

Brady was on his feet. Hands out, and she didn't want to find out what they were out *for*. Chaz's mouth pinched; his face flushed. His own expressions,

not hers. He reached out a skinny hand to Brady, waved him off. "It's not. It's fine."

Hafidha stared at him levelly. "It's fine," Chaz repeated, and looked away.

The conference room door opened, and Agent Bollinger came three steps in before screeching to a stop. She looked at Chaz, at Brady, at Hafidha all on their feet, and took her first step back.

"Agent Bollinger?" Hafidha said, edged and sweet. "One more person we can bring in, if you wouldn't mind. As fast as we can."

"Right," Bollinger said, her forehead crinkling with confusion, and strode quickly through the door and into the hallway.

Hafidha closed her eyes and resisted the urge to look for any stray surveillance cameras near Bradley McClellan's office. To make sure they were in time.

*

Unlike his lover, Bradley McClellan looked around Interview One nervously; the jumpy terror of the pure-hearted. Hafidha wiped her hands on her pants. She hadn't done an interview in years, now. Hadn't interacted with people who weren't law enforcement officers, or medical staff, or family.

Ooh how you'll fuck him up, girl. How you'll eat his little heart.

"Shut up," she mouthed to the Bug, and rubbed her head over the spot where that microchip lay asleep against her grey matter. Opened the door, and went inside.

He looked up abruptly as she entered: afraid and eager, all at once. If that's how he'd looked at Drew Pennicuik the first time they'd met, or the second, or the third, then he'd been doomed. It was written all over the poor guy.

"Officer," he said, staring apprehensively at her folder. She didn't bother to correct him. "Is everything all right? I don't understand what's--I don't understand," he finished awkwardly.

"You're not in any trouble," she told him in her best unused soothing voice. *Not from us, anyway.* "We asked you here to talk about a person of interest in an ongoing investigation. As a witness."

The flutter of emotions over his face was genuine: worry, anxiety, sheer relief. "I don't know what I might have seen," he said, and she opened up the folder.

"It's to do with a man going by the name of David Lucas."

"I've only known Dave a few weeks," he said, and even under the alarm, he

couldn't hide the edges of the smile. The way his chin tucked just a little.

In love. Head over heels. Besotted.

"That's not his real name," she said, and *oh man, here we go*. "It's Drew Pennicuik." And she lays down Exhibit A: that printout of his driver's license, complete with picture.

"That's not--" he said, and stopped cold. Reached out a finger to trace the lines of that wildly curly hair, the chin. The nose.

"It's him," she said, and hated herself. "He isn't telling you the truth."

Bradley McClellan looked up at her urgently. Like a kicked puppy. Like a beaten child. "But we were--" he said, and his mouth shaped something further. Something inaudible, inexpressible: a hand reaching out to hold another, and finding only dead air.

"Bradley," she said, firm and urgent. "Brad. He has a history. Every month or so he picks up someone new and drops them the second they get comfortable. This was the last one." She slapped down Jeremiah Brown's driver's license picture in front of him like a poker dealer. "And this was the one before that." Lucy Jones-Mercado. "These here were all last year's batch."

"People have exes," he said uncomfortably.

"Bradley," Hafidha said, in her mother's voice; the voice you didn't gainsay. "Drew Pennicuik's last two exes are dead."

He caught his breath.

Not quick enough. He wasn't surprised. Hafidha sat back for a second, before she realized: He'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop; waiting all along. And now that it had, now that it was here, he was finally, in some terrible way, safe.

You're hurting him, she realized, and it wasn't the nasty little voices this time. It was her.

God. She had to finish it. Just finish it.

"They killed themselves. He finds people who are lonely," she said, looking directly into his eyes; looking so he would not dare to look away. "He sweeps in and romances them, treats them like gold, waits until they fall in love. And then he leaves."

The young man's mouth worked. Young indeed; so damned young. "Why?" he said, like a six-year-old child.

"Because, honey," Hafidha said gently, "he likes to hurt people."

There was nothing to describe the look on his face. She kept her eyes open, and watched it. She owed him at least that.

The tiny monster in her head wanted, needed that.

"I'm sorry," she added miserably, even though he would never, ever know why.

Bradley McClellan looked at all the profiles, all the identities, all the suicide reports spread out on the table in front of him. He spread his thick hands wide. His thumb blocked out Lucy Jones-Mercado's face.

"Oh," he said, softly. The sound of a face going slack. Of something ripping out, sharply, by the roots. "Oh."

*

They'd be wheels up from Logan in half an hour and Chaz was pushing his belongings into his duffel before the thing that muttered uneasily at the back of his mind finally spoke up.

It was the hotel's laundry bag that did it. He snagged it off the closet floor, found the exposed bits of the plastic draw tape, and pulled them. The bag wrinkled...

...and there he was, the loop of plastic stretched between his two hands, the plastic bag constricted by it. Strangled.

The law could do nothing to Drew Pennicuik. But the person who'd strangled Viv Paliotto in Seattle, who'd caught up with Hope Mitchell when the ACTF couldn't--

Their very own jammer housecleaner. Now that they'd found Pennicuik, the housecleaner would, too.

And they couldn't protect Pennicuik any more than they could charge him with a crime.

He fumbled his phone out and speed-dialed Falkner. Even though there was nothing she could do, either.

*

Esther Falkner got back to the office at three in the afternoon. She kicked her go bag under the desk and checked the mail tray on her desk. A slim white envelope, sealed and thick enough to block the most dedicated snooping, lay lonely inside. The return address was the FBI seal, and Office of the Director.

The seal ripped satisfyingly under her thumb. The paper inside was thick too, and heavy; embossed official letterhead on the very top.

To: Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner

From: the Office of the Director

This communication is to offer you the post of Agent In Charge of the Anomalous Crimes Task Force, reporting directly to SSA Victor Celentano within the Behavioral Analysis Unit. Your federal employee grade and reimbursement will be increased commensurately.

I know you will continue to show the high standards of duty and performance the people of the United States expect from those who uphold the law.

Sincerely, et cetera, et cetera.

Falkner swallowed. Walked slowly down the hall, one door over, to Stephen Reyes's office.

He was at his desk as usual, as always. Surrounded by stacks of unending things to be done, and wearing a focused frown. He looked up at the sound of her shuffling footsteps, and put his pen down. "You're back," he said.

"We're back."

He studied her. Eyebrows knitting just slightly together. "How did it go?"

Falkner let out a thin breath. "It," she said, "was terrible."

Act V

They used to burn love letters. Back when we still exchanged physical things just to talk, to reach across the distance, there was something left after to burn.

Deleting his e-mails, his text messages, his number from your phone doesn't feel even close to the same.

The first day or two aren't terrible. The shock insulates you. You throw yourself into your work, your friends, all the things you've neglected restlessly, thinking, in those moments when you let yourself do any thinking, *Actually, I might be all right. I didn't need him. I didn't want him.*

It's the third day, and after, that the ache sets in. *He didn't want me. I will never smell him in my hair again. I will never see that smile and get to kiss it, corner to corner.*

After that, you don't sleep.

*

For the first time since they moved in together, taking up uneasy space and building their uneasy routine, Hafidha does not come straight home after

work.

Chaz picks his nails and frets and tries not to glance at the clock more than three times a minute. It could be a delay on the metro. It could be she's finishing her paperwork, documenting for the less-technical in the room--read: Victor Celentano--the web of names and impostures and impact wounds that Drew Pennicuik created in such a short time. Or tagging each and every one of them with some string of code like an informer, to let her know immediately if they're ever touched again.

He could call her at the office. He could call Falkner. He could call building security, and have them surreptitiously check for a line of light at the bottom of her closed door.

"You need to not do this," he mutters to himself, and continues to wait.

She doesn't get home until ten past eight, her short hair spangled with fallen petals and spring rain. Puts down her big purse by the door, nonchalant; hangs her keys ringing on the rack above it. Play it cool, Chaz tells himself, and then promptly and totally fails: "Where have you been?"

Hafidha stops mid-step; slowly, deliberately sheds her lace-up boots. "I went to see the cherry blossoms," she says coolly. "They won't be out for much longer."

He swallows. And can't make it come out not accusing, not plaintive, not scared to death. "You didn't call," he says.

Hafidha sizes him up. A Bug look. A look that's fight-or-flight, measuring the distance between his feet and hers.

"Charles," she says, "we have to talk."

*

You're not new at this. You know all the tricks: don't look at his Facebook profile. Don't look at his Twitter. Don't think about what he's doing, or who he's talking to, or why his dating site profile was reactivated three days after it ended, and then went dark a scant week after. Don't think about what you could have done better, or right, or different. Don't rewrite those conversations in your head.

Talk to your friends if you need to. Don't talk about him if you don't.

The ache lives like a bear cub under your ribs. It gnaws at you all day and worse at night, looking for an escape from behind those bone bars. You lie awake in too-cold, empty sheets, having wild arguments in your head with anyone, everyone who's ever wronged you. You go through your daily activities with heavy eyes and heavy feet; with what online depression tests

call "less than normal enthusiasm." You hurt.

You hurt.

Your friends notice the absence of his name from your conversation and turn away, or watch you sidelong, or tell you tentatively that they're there if you want to talk.

You don't want to talk. You don't want to talk to anybody. You'll never utter a sound ever again.

*

"We've got a problem," Hafidha says, and Chaz nods, is nodding, although he's not sure the problem he thinks is there and the one she's putting on the table are the same problem at all.

Luckily she's not finished; she's going to tell him what the problem is anyway. "We've got a problem with how you and I are acting toward each other. 'Cause Baby Brother, I'm resenting you like fuck right now, and that means this is going wrong."

A lump solidifies in his throat like a handy internal garrote. He thought he could do this. He thought they'd pull through this together, that he could be enough support and keep what's left of his family, his real family, alive--

"Because y'see, I keep thinking about that pretty little boy I talked to before we left Boston," she says.

"Bradley," he says faintly.

"Bradley," she says, and nods. "And how much he didn't want to know that someone was using him. How much he decided it was okay to be hurt if he might get some scrap of love."

"He cut Pennicuik off," Chaz said.

"We think," Hafidha snapped. "Who knows? He might go back. He might wake up one night and decide he doesn't care what the cost is, he wants that pretty fantasy back. People sell out for half-assed love all the time."

Chaz has been the person who laid awake at four in the morning. Who hid his cell phone to keep from texting exes for whole days at a time. He just nods.

"And the thing is?" Hafidha says, rubbing that spot on her head she always touches when she's really, truly upset. "If I decide it's okay to live with someone always checking up on where I am or what I'm thinking, where we assume that I'm *always wrong*, then I'm just as bad." She heaves a breath, lets it out. Her hands, Chaz notes clinically, are shaking. "I'll be just as bad as those poor sad bastards who Loverboy Drew sucked in and spit back out."

He doesn't need her to pull that subtext out into the plain air: *And then you're just as bad as he is.* He's had lots of practice at keeping that flinch from surfacing; from giving the thing in his Wabbit's head any satisfaction. *That's just the Bug talking.* But it isn't. It's not. Hafidha's eyes are calm and mild and utterly resolute. Hafidha Gates is in the building.

"It's not like that," he says, although he knows how stupid, how stereotypical it sounds. *Yeah, that's what every piece of nasty caught with their fist all over someone else's face says.* He backs up. Tries again: "I'm not trying to *do* that."

"Yeah," Hafidha says, "but we're gonna be doing that soon if this ride keeps riding." She looks up at him, jaw set. "Y'know what happened last night?"

"What?" Chaz asks faintly.

"I had a dream where he was holding me," she says. "He just picked me up like a kid and put me in his lap and kept telling me how it'd be okay. He rocked me 'til I woke up."

Chaz swallows past a dry throat. He's never had those dreams. When the people he loves are gone, they're gone away for good. "That sounds...really wonderful."

She smiles, and it's not a smile: it's a parody, thin and sad. "Honey," she said, "I didn't want to wake up. Not ever. I've lost him," she says, and looks down at her hands. "He's gone."

Chaz clenches his hands tight. Resists the urge to comfort. To say he'll make it right. To take her space away. To protect. To smother.

Hafidha looks up again, and her eyes are bright and hard. "I'm not losing you too, Baby Brother," she says. "And I'm sure as hell not losing any more of me."

*

The worst of it is you don't want him. All the wanting in you withered and died the second you saw those photos, those faces, understood deep down that the love you felt coming from his eyes, his mouth was just a shallow reflection of what you were aching to give.

He was never the one for you. He never will be. He was a dream.

You go back on the online dating scene while you're too needy, while you're not ready, and you still don't want him back. You sleep with a bearded, slick-mouthed grad student from MIT who's not looking for anything but a thrill, and it doesn't fix the hurting, and you still don't want him back.

A week goes by. Two weeks. You were together barely three.

It isn't fair how the hurt's still haunting you. You *don't even want him back.*

*

Chaz Villette is rooted to his own hardwood floor. Chaz Villette is, rare as it is after years of practice, onion-layers of professional training, scraps of maturity, in tears.

Hafidha doesn't have a mirror. *You broke him*, the Bug says gleefully. And she can't tell if it's lying, telling lies just to feed on her, or if it's entirely true.

The panic starts to rise like hangover in her throat.

"What," he says, controlled and ragged, "do you need me to do?"

Name your terms, she hears. She spent all night walking, practicing for this. She thought she was going to be ready.

"I need you to not hover over me," she says. It comes out right: good and strong. "And not check up on me. And not--not keep from me *what is mine* because you think it might maybe, somehow, somewhere make me cry. I'm thirty-six years old, Chaz, and I'm not dying of Victorian consumption, and I might be full of God knows what in my head, but I'm *still a person.*"

He says nothing. He's as pale as Chazzes get. He does nothing but nod, once, sharp.

"If you're going to trust me," she says, weakly, frustrated, "you need to actually *trust me.* That's it. That's all."

When he speaks, she can barely hear him. It takes a second for the words to register, untangle themselves in her ears: "I can do that."

Hafidha's breath ghosts out, slow. *It's not true*, the Bug says, leaden in the space between her throat and collarbone. Or maybe not the Bug. Maybe just the voice you always hear when you're brokenhearted, knowing quiet that you'll never be loved again.

But Chaz Villette is a mind reader. Or doesn't have to be: Maybe it's just the way people you've loved, hated, cried with, mourned beside know what it means when that light goes out of your eyes.

"I can do it," he says, again.

"Yeah?" she says.

"Yeah."

"Okay," she says. And then shakier, hardest of all. Like pushing a rock all the way uphill with the anomaly and anger and habit and her own lifelong pride pushing from the other side: "I forgive you."

*

They used to burn love letters, and maybe you'd heal quicker if you had something left to burn. Some symbol, something representative. Some way to leave him too.

You don't want him back. What you want back is yourself.

You're not okay. You're not going to be okay until some invisible timer goes off; until some statute of limitations is up, and you can't see the clock, and the schedule is blank. But there's a clock, and there's a schedule. And somewhere ahead you will be better, and whole, and sane, and throw yourself wholeheartedly into some shy-smiling man's arms like you've never, ever known pain.

Chin up, you tell yourself, day after day. Morning after morning. Every time it hurts. *Keep moving.*

You're not okay. But you will be.

*

"We're not okay, are we?" Hafidha says, and her hands interlace, worry at each other like they haven't since she was very, very young.

"No," Chaz says, drained. Turns his head to watch her, over one bony shoulder, scarred-up beneath his shirt. "But we'll make it okay. I swear." And extends a hand, pinky out, like it's teatime. Pinky-swear. He wants to pinky-swear.

Peace officers, FBI agents, are trained to never make a promise they're not dead sure they can keep.

Hafidha nods, once, slowly. Takes his pinky in hers. Feels the tug of his bony finger on hers.

He goes into the kitchen, hides under the clatter of pots and the thunk of a chef's knife on wood. And Hafidha lets him go. Away from her need for comfort, and away from the thing in her head that likes so very much to hurt people. To gash itself like a dirty blade into her own skin.

She wraps her arms around herself. Conjures up a dying smell, a dying voice, and rocks herself like a child.

Prisoner of Zenda

Boston, MA, January 2012

The Boston field office was a place of veritable riches. No hot-plate coffeepot for them: the floor the ACTF was situated on had a kitchen, and the kitchen had a Keurig machine.

"Look. At. This," Chaz Villette breathed as Nikki Lau passed by, on her way rapidly to somewhere. A whole stand of instant coffee pods stood before him on the counter, in a round retail-rack dispenser. "I was just supposed to grab everyone coffee."

"Wasteful," Lau noted. "Think about all the plastic islands that plastic's making out in the ocean."

Chaz ran a finger down the rows of labels. "Van Houtte butterscotch or Big Easy Bold, vouched for by none other than Chef Emeril Lagasse?"

Lau pulled a face. "I have never put *garlic* in my coffee."

"Breakfast blend it is," Chaz said, and plucked one out. "Bam."

"Stick to the basic stuff," Bollinger said, lingering in the doorway behind Lau. "Whatever they use for vanilla flavor in those things, it's terrible."

"Imagine the betrayal," Lau said gravely. "The king of spices goes to the Dark Side."

Bollinger tipped her head like a sparrow. "Vanilla is the king of spices?"

Chaz blushed. "It's something I say."

"Then it's like *The Prisoner of Zenda,*" Bollinger said, and took a big blue mug off the shelf. "He may look like the king, but he ain't him."

4.06 "Wild Card" - by Leah Bobet

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Dear *Shadow Unit* readers:

While we don't normally preface an episode with a content warning, we've felt it appropriate to put one forward for "Wild Card" in light of the mass shooting that occurred in Aurora, Colorado on July 20, 2012. This episode deals with themes and content which may be difficult for some readers in the context of that real-life event, and while the *Shadow Unit* writers sincerely enjoy emotionally complicated reactions, we'd prefer to generate them on purpose, and not because of the quirks of five-year story scheduling.

Everyone in the *Shadow Unit* writer's room would like to urge you to please exercise discretion and self-care, and if you feel the need to sit this one out or hold it for later, that's entirely understood, appreciated, and supported on this side of the desk.

Thanks again,

The Writing Staff

Act I

Chicago, IL, July 10, 2012

"And I need to pay this power bill too," the old man at Sondra's till said. "Miss, quickly. I've got somewhere else to be."

Have you ever, she thought acidly behind her bright professional smile, *heard of Internet banking?*

"All right, we can do that," she said through her teeth, and took the creased and overdue power bill from the laminated counter in front of her. The sound system was playing something overly perky and full of jazz clarinets. One hour into her shift, and her neck already hurt from holding the frustration in. Right--get into finance. It was better than working in diners, scraping cold french fries off plasticky plates and sucking up for tips. Her temp agency

placement counselor had neglected to mention that working in a bank was still working retail, with all the disdain and stupidity and pointlessness of retail, just with less comfortable clothes.

She wrinkled her nose just as deep as the skin on her customer's hands. The paper was damp. He'd sweated all over it.

She was dusting her hand on her black dress-code-approved skirt when the entire east wall of windows teetered in their frames and fell out of the building.

It took a moment for her brain to catch up: there were the windows, the gorgeous view of the trees and sidewalk and coffee shop across the street, tilting down, creaking, and crashing to the sidewalk. There were the pedestrians, scattering into the street; the sound of shrieks and car horns and tires as a cab yanked itself out of the way.

There was the red Volkswagen driving right through the space where the windows used to be, spinning a circle on the marble floors, and screeching to a halt in the foyer.

What? she managed, damp sticky bill still in hand, before the doors opened and the masked men tumbled out.

"Oh, shit," Pierre at the next desk said, and dropped to the floor. She looked down and saw him fumble for a button under the desk. The silent alarm. He was hitting the silent alarm button.

This was a robbery.

Two men in black masks opened wide burlap sacks with big black dollar signs stenciled on them, thick with the scent of permanent marker, and two more fired three rounds into the air. Customers screamed. The old man in front of Sondra's till clutched his brown porkpie hat.

A pair of pinstripe-suited legs emerged from the passenger side of the Bug, capped in shiny black leather loafers. Their owner ducked out gun first and tailcoat last. His face was painted carnival white, with his lips outlined in a terrible red grin.

The clown-painted man in the three-piece suit drew a slow arc with his automatic across the teller counter and stopped in a direct line to Sondra's chest.

"Take me," he said, in an old Chicago mobster accent that had to be dead fake, "to the vault, doll, and nobody gets hurt."

"Me?" she said. It was hard to breathe. Her voice came out in a squeak.

The clown squinted, jerked his big chin past her. "No, *her*. You see any other dollfaces in here?"

Sondra turned to see Charlene, the tall, blond assistant manager, teeter toward him on her black four-inch heels, eyes huge and terrified. She dropped the phone bill and sat down behind the particle board counter, guaranteed to stop exactly no bullets from entering her delicate and precious flesh.

Damn, but she hated this job.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, July 19, 2012

"I'm about ready to present the case," Nikki Lau said, and SSA Esther Falkner--now Special Agent in Charge Esther Falkner--looked up from the bullet-point list on her computer monitor.

Lau was framed in her doorway, not a hair out of place, as usual. Falkner scrutinized her for signs of excessive politeness. The way the team looked at her was different now; had been different ever since she'd been formally invested as Special Agent in Charge and Reyes had cleared the last dusty rubber bands out of his desk.

His door sat locked now. Technically, Falkner had a right to move into the bigger office. But she hadn't yet, and was pretty sure she wouldn't, ever. She wasn't Reyes, this was her space, and moving just frankly sucked.

No, she decided; *no excessive deference here.* And so: "I'll be right there and get you properly sent off," she said, and locked her computer even though nobody was going to be in the unit, never mind her office.

"Not coming along?" Lau asked, lingering in the doorway.

"Paperwork," Falkner said, and for a moment, brutally regretted it. There were good reasons to be sidelined: she had a job posting to draft to fill the vacancies in the unit. Her back was having one of its bad weeks: a nagging, pulling pain that meant walking that much slower and taking that many more painkillers to settle down. Deborah had a softball game tonight at seven, and she'd promised she'd actually be there.

She had always been the backup team lead in Stephen Reyes's absence, and now that he was gone, it was her job to develop someone else's capacity to lead them. Which meant her team working without her, live without a net.

Desk job, she thought, and her soul sighed like a big exasperated dog. This was how it ended. Not with a bang, but a whimper.

"I'll see if I can get Celentano to lend us Tan or Pauley," she said. "The job

posting goes up this week. It'll get better when we have another pair of hands."

There was no question that she'd get that temporary loaner; one or even both. Victor Celentano's quarrel had, for whatever reason, been with Stephen Reyes. Falkner had ended up on the ACTF in the first place because upper management saw her as diligent, someone who could keep the pressure from blowing; keep Reyes's less social tendencies in line. And even though she'd interpreted that expectation in her own ways for years, relations between Shadow Unit and Down the Hall had never been so cordial.

Lau nodded. "I'll get everyone together, then."

Falkner took a minute to drain her coffee and send her phone to voice mail before she trailed Lau to the briefing closet, where her team--four bodies large, which meant three too small--was already seated around the table. They didn't rib her at all for being last through the door. Definitely excessive politeness. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it. "Thanks for the forbearance, folks. Please go ahead."

Lau stood up and prodded her laptop to life. A grainy shot of security camera footage flicked onto the screen: two men in black balaclavas, holding weapons on a cowering crowd against a background of shattered glass and potted green plants. Two more masked men held something crumpled in their hands. There was a fifth, tall and narrow, standing with them in a pin-striped suit, his back to the camera.

"We're looking at a string of armed robberies in downtown Chicago, all by the same gang. They've pulled off four broad daylight bank robberies in as many weeks. They're smart enough to not fire a shot unless it's into the ceiling, and so nobody's been hurt except cuts and scrapes from broken glass, which kept it to a pair of major crimes detectives before, well, this."

Lau clicked the remote again, and the pin-striped man filled the screen. A close-up this time, including rumpled brown hair and his face: covered in white paint and a false clown grin, cheeks famine-victim hollow.

"Why so serious?" Chaz Villette said, and Hafidha rolled her eyes.

Brady leaned in, examining the pixelated screen capture. "So gamma bank robber drives through the glass, they take the cash, and...what?" Brady asked.

Lau's face was poker-star blank. Which meant this was going to be extra good. She only saved the Inscrutable Asian look for when she really wanted to make you drop out of your chair. "They didn't drive through the glass. The windows conveniently fell right out of the wall, and the UNSUB drove right through the hole. In a stolen VW Beetle."

Chaz Villette blinked. "Five guys in a VW Bug?"

Lau clicked to the next slide: a close-up shot of something metal that didn't yet make sense. "Unfortunately, that's not actually the manifestation. The windows came out because the adhesive holding them in suddenly failed to adhere. And then the local police and the insurance investigators realized the burgled vaults wouldn't lock again after the robberies. They didn't just open the vaults; they replaced the steel in the vault lock with calcium carbonate. The magnet keeping the vault locked had nothing to grab on to except Tums."

And yes, there it was: the picture was the side of a bank vault door. Lau traced the white blotch on the screen with a red laser pointer. The work was seamless. Falkner would have sworn it came that way factory-direct.

"How'd they do that?" Brady said, even though he surely knew the answer.

Lau wiggled her fingers. "Maaaagic."

"So *that's* the manifestation," Chaz said, forehead wrinkled. "Transmutation. Alchemy. That could go really bad if he escalates."

Falkner caught the look on his face and nodded. "There's iron in blood."

"Dental fillings," Brady added, suddenly somber.

"Why not just buy some lead and turn it into gold and skip the bank robbing part?" Hafidha asked dryly.

"That," Falkner said, "is a question you lucky folks will all get to answer in Chicago."

Reactions around the table; reactions for everyone. Brady's eyebrow went up, Hafidha leaned back, and Chaz pulled that still, blank face that surfaced when he *didn't* want to react. "I'll be available by phone from the office, and there will be one more agent. In the meantime, though, Agent Lau is in charge."

Lau blinked. *Me?*

Falkner leaned back in her chair, confident, leaderly: *Yes, you.*

To her credit, she adjusted quickly. "All right," Lau said. "The plane's almost ready to go, so we'll call it wheels up in an hour and map the robbery sites in transit. Let's get moving."

The look she cast Falkner on the way out the door was equal parts surprised and intimidated and determined and actually-I-don't-like-surprises. *That's right*, Falkner thought, walking back to her office. *We call this maneuver the Mean Sergeant.*

That look was perfect.

They were going to do just fine.

*

The file dropped on Arthur Tan's desk just in time to catch the last crumb from his sandwich.

He looked up, and the perpetrator was standing right above him: Victor Celentano. Make that *Unit Chief* Celentano.

"Sir," he said, and wiped the second-last crumbs from his mouth with as much dignity as was possible. "We have a case?"

Celentano shook his head. "Down the Hall does, and they're still a man short. The flight leaves for Chicago in forty minutes."

"Right," he said, and wiped his hand on his cafeteria napkin. "I'll liaise with them right away." Internally, he winced. Padma was going to *hate* this. He would have to send her sushi delivery for dinner tonight before he left. The good kind, with the hand rolls.

Tan picked up the phone and dialed Sushi Garden by memory. Flipped open the case file idly as he did, paging through the incident reports and eyewitness statements.

Stopped, and dropped the phone into its cradle.

"Hey, Pauley," Tan said.

Pete Pauley spun his desk chair around, pen behind his ear. "Mm?"

"Do we have," he asked, and held up the photo between thumb and finger, "any official Bureau procedures for supervillains?"

Act II

Chicago, IL

"It had to happen sometime," Lau said, go bag in hand, as they climbed the short steps of the Racine Avenue police station. It stood like a camel-colored cinderblock at the busy street corner. Long plastic blinds fluttered in the blocky windows. In L.A. the building would have been snapped up for a dance club. Or a boutique hotel. And in DC, it would be government property and surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

"What, Chicago?" Brady said. "Last I heard it's been happening since the 1830s."

She shot him a dirty look and almost missed the edge of the top step. "No," she said, like you did to a big brother or a small child. "Supervillains. Enough

people read comic books that this was totally in the bag. Not everyone's worldview is straight out of *American Gothic*."

"Or the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," Hafidha added.

"Hey," Brady said. "Other states have also had chainsaw massacres."

"Name one," Hafidha replied, and then they opened the door and were inside.

Their liaison officer was already at the desk: a white, broad-stomached, thin-haired man with a meaty handshake. "Detective Pete O'Leary," he said, and thankfully stopped crushing Lau's free hand before she had to cry uncle. "Glad to have you on board."

"Agent Nicolette Lau," she said; the extra syllables in her first name gave her more leaderly gravitas. "These are Agents Brady, Villette, Tan, and Gates."

"A pleasure," O'Leary said to the lot of them, and waved them around the desk. "We have a spare office, but it'll be a tight fit. We're just a little neighborhood station here."

"Not to worry," Lau said, remembering the spaces they'd worked out of in Chillicothe, in Natchez, mobile in rural Texas. This would be what they called a policing first-world problem. "I'm sure we'll do just fine."

The office *was* perfectly fine: a vacant one the size of Reyes's office--his *old* office, Lau reminded herself--with two desks hastily shoved against opposite walls. Hafidha dropped the two suitcases that held her mobile office on the one farthest from the door and proclaimed "Shotgun," cheerfully.

"That's only for cars," Chaz mumbled, arms full of suitcase. He cast around for a place to drop it and settled on the floor in the corner.

"I can get you more chairs," O'Leary said apologetically.

Lau nodded. "Much appreciated," she said, crisp and professional. *You're imitating Falkner*, she realized abruptly. *Cut it out.* "We're going to be mostly in the field anyway today, I think."

"You want to see the last robbery site?" O'Leary said, a little too eager. *A robbery detective who wants to be a murder detective; check.* Sure, let him have it; she watched *CSI* too.

"Exactly," she said, and turned to the rest of the team. "Danny?" In charge or not, calling him SSA Brady was just plain weird.

"Sure thing," he said, and picked the regulation government car keys back up off of the regulation government desk.

Lau turned to Hafidha and found herself at a loss. She knew every agent on

her team was a resource. She knew how they were best deployed. But not better than they did; not better than they could feel out their own strengths.

And knowing that is your *strength*, she told herself mildly, and squared her shoulders. "What's your first line of inquiry?" she asked.

"Let's see that security camera footage," Hafidha said, and snapped open the clasps on the first metal suitcase. "I bet we can get a good facial composite if I click real slow."

"Oh, we have a composite as well," O'Leary said, and fumbled through his folder. "We had our witnesses sit down with one of our sketch artists and work up a portrait. She got rid of the makeup to approximate the facial structure underneath, and here's what she turned out."

Huh, Lau thought. A robbery detective who might just make murder detective, if he stayed that proactive on all his cases.

Detective O'Leary held up the sketch. It was pencil shaded, bereft of clean lines. A long chin, narrow cheekbones, dark eyebrows. Two fuzzes of simulated shadow highlighted the gauntness of the cheeks.

"One of ours," Daniel Brady said.

"Or a Morlock," Hafidha replied, still connecting USB cables to hardware the same way some people cleaned and assembled a shotgun.

"Or a supervillain," Arthur Tan said, and Lau quirked an eyebrow. He quirked one right back.

"I do *not* want nerds with gamma powers," Hafidha muttered, and hit the power button on her rig pointedly with her finger. "I know nerds. I *am* nerds."

O'Leary glanced between them with a faintly puzzled expression on his broad face, but said nothing. They were federal agents. Clearly they were contractually obligated to crack wise.

"In that case, I'm gonna follow the money," she said, with a glint in her eye. "Detective, has the bank provided a list of serial numbers for the large bills?"

"I can get that for you," he said, and the confused lines smoothed out of his forehead into a more intent expression: complete mental note-taking. *Follow the money; check.*

Lau cleared her throat slightly; another Falknerian mannerism creeping right in. "Chaz?"

Chaz unfolded the map he'd been marking up on the plane. "Going to do the geographic profile. Here's the area he's sticking to: the Loop and the Near West Side."

"Armed robbers know better than to shit where they eat," Brady said. "That is, if they want to keep robbing banks today."

Chaz nodded. "He'll be close enough for those neighborhoods to stay accessible, but that's not where he lives."

"There's an easy way to find *out* where he lives," Lau put in, and turned around the map.

"Oh?" Brady asked.

She pulled a green marker from the side of Chaz's bag. "How do you and Agent Tan feel about finding some comic stores?"

*

Two steps into Punch in the Face Comics, and Arthur Tan was convinced the door was hooked up to his childhood. Specifically, 1989 in Columbus, Ohio, two minutes before Batman #428 made its way into his backpack. Same gray institutional carpeting; same walls upon walls of shelving, wrapped tight around a floor covered in chest-height longboxes crammed with single-issue runs.

Agent Brady's nose wrinkled. Tan grinned. "Ah, fanboy funk," he said, and sniffed appreciatively. "Some smells you never forget."

"I can see why," Brady said.

"Jock," Tan replied cheerfully, and picked his way around the longboxes to the front counter.

The man behind the counter was tall and spindly looking; the kind of guy you'd think you could take in either a fight or thumb war before you saw the lumpy muscle in his arms. He had a dark, prickly beard going on that mercifully stopped before the neck. *Good on you for fighting the war against stereotypes*, Tan thought, and waited to catch the guy's eye.

"Help ya?" he said, and as if they'd even thought about planning it, Brady and Tan pulled out their badges.

The guy behind the counter went white. Whiter. He was already plenty white. "Look, is this a bust?"

Brady stopped, looked down at him. "Is there something we ought to be busting you for?"

"The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund thinks *not*, G-man," he said hotly.

Brady stepped back, buffeted by the force of sheer nonplussedness. Tan felt the entirely inappropriate urge to giggle. Not at any point in all his years had

he been called a G-man.

He kind of liked it.

The guy behind the counter was turning red under his beard. "I'm tweeting Neil Gaiman *right now*. I'll do it, buddy," he said.

Brady blinked. "Who?"

The guy looked quite literally down his nose at him. "God," he said, disgusted. "Really?"

"Really," Tan said. "Sorry."

"You should be," he said, and put his hands on the counter. "This isn't a bust, is it?"

"It's not," Tan said, and put away his badge. "We're canvassing the neighborhood to identify a suspect in a robbery."

The clerk's mouth pinched tight. Considering all the single issues in here, and the way the really articulated models and busts were tucked safely into locked glass cases, he probably had a serious opinion on the word *robbery*.

"We just want to know if you recognize this man," Brady said resignedly, and held up the sketch. It fluttered in the air-conditioning.

The guy peered at the sketch. "I don't think so. Maybe," he said, sounding doubtful for the first time, possibly, in his life. "Let me ask Kelly." He cupped hands around his mouth, called across the store: "Kel?"

A twentysomething girl with bottle-red hair swung out from the back room, a huge box of comics balanced on both arms. "Oh hey, original art? Is that David Mack?"

"Police sketch," Tan replied, beyond flappable now. "Does the person in it look familiar? Like a customer you might have seen? He's about yea high"--he mimed with his hand--"and really, really thin."

The redhead put down her box and squinted. "Oh. This one. I know this one," she said, and jumped to the computer on the desk. "He kept calling me 'my dear' like he was some cut-rate Doctor Doom, and he never picked up his pull list." The look on her face was as close as civilians could get to Agent Brady's fanboy-funk expression. Tan genuinely couldn't read which listed offense she considered the greater crime.

"Do you have a name or contact information for him?" Brady asked.

The redhead--Kelly--tapped a few more keys on the computer. "Right," she said. "Dan Morrison. Tried to tell me his name was Danny Dare, but lucky for

you, we take ID for pull lists bigger than fifty bucks a week. What'd he do?"

"He's wanted for questioning in a string of robbery cases," Tan said.

"Oh," the redhead replied; intrigued. That car-crash kind of intrigued. "Wouldn't have thought ol' Danny had it in him."

"Well, they don't know he does, yet," the beardy clerk put in, looking a little bit put out.

"Here's his cell number," she said, and scribbled the digits on a piece of scrap paper. Pushed it across the counter toward Tan and Brady. "If he's not a master criminal, tell him to pick up his damn comics."

Tan and Brady pushed out the door into the sunlight, and Tan said, "Not bad."

"Not bad at all. To the Batmobile," Brady said, swinging into the driver's seat.

"No, no," Tan said, and then dropped his chin, and said in an entirely different voice: husky, hoarse, dark, and familiar. "To the Batmobile."

"Nerd," Brady replied, and shut the car door.

*

They had swept the broken glass off the tree-lined sidewalk, but Nikki Lau still heard little crunches beneath her toes as she walked up to the bank branch. She picked up one leg and examined the sole of her shoe; if there were still glass fragments there, they were too small to see.

Chaz Villette strode ahead of her, angling his head to inspect what were once the weatherproof joins on a wall of safety glass windows. They had covered the empty holes left with plastic sheeting. It billowed and crackled in the Windy City wind.

He held the sheeting aside and peered up into the bracket that had once held the windows. "The adhesive didn't fail. There's no adhesive *left*," he said.

"I wonder what industrial adhesive turns into when you add a basic chemical reaction," Lau replied.

Chaz dropped the sheet and made for the door. "A basic magic chemical reaction," he tossed over his shoulder. Lau wasn't sure whether to sigh or snicker. She followed.

The crime-scene techs were still working over the surface of the vault door with fingerprint brushes and tweezers, hunting for the slightest hair that might net them an evidence chain. One of them, brown hair twisted back under a ball cap, slight and short in her uniform, stood up and nodded at their badges. "Detective O'Leary told us you'd be by. Jane Townsend."

"Nikki Lau," she said, and stuck out a hand. This one didn't need syllables. "This is SA Charles Villette."

"Pleasure," she said, consummately professional. "So you want to see the mystery?"

She led them through a gauntlet of hunched, crouched, whispering techs inspecting every angle of the marble-floored bank like art restorers. Pens and documents lay scattered where they had fallen: a day's business flash-frozen and abandoned along the suddenly patio-style east wall into the street.

The vault was open and, Lau assumed, rumpled out of order; she hadn't seen the insides of enough bank vaults to say what they looked like when they were feeling good. A gray folding table had been set up in its centre: evidence-sorting station and command center, all in one. Townsend grabbed a small sample bag, one of dozens filled with specks of white powder, and handed it to Lau. "This is it."

She peered down. She had thought it would be bigger: a tiny puddle of calcium carbonate the techs had scraped out of the steel vault door. Chaz took another baggie, held it up to the light, and squinted. "Could I get a pair of gloves, please?"

There were gloves. Crime-scene techs were the portal through which all nitrile gloves flowed. Chaz snapped them on and dipped a finger into the powder. It shifted like a pile of fluffier sand. She looked up at the door: the hole in the vault from whence the powder had come was long, and spread out like tree roots, lined with white dust that faded grayer and grayer the farther back she looked.

Lau put down the bag and surveyed the rest of the evidence buffet: a few hairs, tweezed gently into sealed plastic; a pile of statements, hastily taken; a huge evidence bag folded up on itself, and inside it, undyed burlap. Lau picked it up and flattened it to its original size, and there it was: a giant dollar sign, markered onto the side of the rough-woven sack.

"Hey, Chaz," she said, and his eyebrow rose.

"We dusted it for prints, Agents," a tech said, brushing latex-gloved hands on his pants. "It came up negative. They wore gloves."

"That's not the point," Chaz said, excited, and took the fat plastic bag from Lau. "They made money sacks. For their heist. Even though waving this around means they're that much more likely to get caught by a roadblock, or on the street. It was more important than not getting caught."

Lau studied the smudgily markered lines. "He really does think he's a supervillain."

"You totally called it."

"I was *joking*," she said, although she'd only been halfway. Nothing was ever more than halfway funny when you worked for the ACTF.

"Joke about a decent taco joint for me next time, too?" he said, and Lau's jacket pocket lurched in a familiar way. Phone ringing.

She fished it out, hit the button with her thumb. "Lau."

"Hey, babycakes," Hafidha's voice came, blurred, through the line. "You on your way back soon?"

Lau rearranged the phone against her ear. "We're nearly done here."

"Might want to make that double-time," Hafidha said. "We've got mail."

Nikki Lau's phone beeped, loud. She pulled it away and thumbed open the picture Hafidha had just flicked onto her screen.

The front steps of the police station, covered in playing cards, every single one of them jokers wild.

Act III

Chicago PD hadn't been able to hold back the press. Lau and Chaz edged their way into the station past a murder of sharp-eyed reporters, their cameras at the ready, prepping on-air live segments for the six o'clock news. The steps were littered with playing cards, the doors locked, the whole front of the station surrounded by a ring of yellow police tape and grim-faced officers.

Lau held up her badge discreetly at one of them; his eyes widened, and he motioned them around the side.

"That's one thing for not wearing a uniform," Chaz muttered as the doors closed behind them. "Reporters somehow forget to put you in a choke hold for the details of today's special."

"Says you," Lau said. Their footsteps echoed up the metallic gray steps of what looked to be an old service stairwell. "Once they find out we're here, you'll never see me again."

A small handful of playing cards were scattered on Hafidha's claimed gray desk, the evidence bags that encased them reflecting the boiled light above. Detective O'Leary leaned over them, in a posture a sculptor might describe as determined puzzlement. He greeted them with a little wave from his big, long-fingered hand. "The plot thickens."

"Apparently," Lau said. She picked up a baggie, examined the card inside:

pristine, corners unbent; a little man in a tasseled cap riding a red-and-yellow bee. "This fits with what we saw at the latest crime scene; it looks like our UNSUB really is playing supervillain."

Easiest to call it playing. Some local liaisons saw enough, knew enough already to take the truth and not have it throw them off stride. Lau couldn't tell yet if O'Leary's eagerness went that far. Sometimes ambitious cops wanted off the farm, but only so far as the suburbs.

"Oh, and we looked into the stolen bills," Hafidha added. "I'm about halfway through the list, but so far, interesting thing: Mr. Riddler McPenguin here hasn't spent a dime of his loot."

"Guy's a pro," O'Leary said from his corner: a whole complicated smoothie of professional respect and personal disappointment. "He knows we can trace the serial numbers."

"Guy's not that much of a pro," Danny Brady said, pushing through the door just ahead of Arthur Tan, and both of them with a little bit of a strut on. "He still leaves his name and number at the neighborhood comic shop." He dropped a piece of paper on the desk as if it were a royal flush. Scrawled on it in red pen: *Dan Morrison*, and ten precious digits.

O'Leary's head came up, eager and sharp once again, all the fatigue draining away. "I'm going to run this," he said, and swept the scrap of paper off the desk on his way out the door.

Lau nodded at them. "So you found something."

"We found something," Brady said, and sat in the spare chair. "One of the clerks at the third place we tried recognized him. Apparently he doesn't do much to avoid sticking out. If the guy had a moustache, he would twirl it."

"Thing is, the more I think about this the less it fits," Tan said, thoughtfully. "He's careful with the rest of the operation: stolen cars, masks, not firing a shot in the direction of a human body. Why be that sloppy on the back end?"

"He's not being sloppy," Hafidha said, a little light kindling in her eyes: *Eureka*. "It's his mythology. If the boy thinks he's a supervillain, in the world in his little head, slapping on some clown face and a snappy hat is enough of a disguise to fool anyone. He probably looks in the mirror when he's got that makeup on and sees a whole different face."

Tan's own face changed a little. "Superman and Clark Kent," he added.

"Exactly," Hafidha added, and then grinned. "He probably thinks his identity's a big old secret."

You didn't need a magnifying glass to read the subtext. *And that means he*

won't be expecting us.

"I was thinking this was suspiciously easy," Tan said. He almost sounded disappointed. Arthur Tan, Lau decided, would not stop at the suburbs if he ever decided his career wanted to be on Broadway.

Hafidha shook her head. "Honey, it's easy for *us*. We're thinking like a hungry gamma supervillain who cares less about the money than about playing sock puppets and making small children cry. It's a lot harder to crack when you think like a bank robber who's trying to get rich."

She saw the thing in Tan's head click. "They called us because they had the wrong profile," he said.

"Right," Lau added. "And had no way of getting the right one."

"Says something for Dad's approach, doesn't it?" Chaz said, and Lau glanced over sharply. He shrugged, a whole inch of movement. Yes: they'd just *keep* getting the wrong profiles, as long as most of the world didn't know what to look for, or where.

Nobody'd ever said the ACTF didn't come with killer job security.

O'Leary opened the door again, all that investigative spark sucked right out of him. "The phone number goes to a burner," he said, and five people collectively let out their breath. So much for home by suppertime. "Back to the traffic cameras, I suppose."

"Cameras?" Chaz asked.

"There's one at the corner out front. We're reviewing the footage for a license plate or face on the card dump," O'Leary said. That tightness was back in his forehead again. It made him look about fifteen years older. "It happened in broad daylight. There wasn't any further communication; no note, nothing. Media relations isn't too happy with us right now."

Lau could imagine.

"Taunting the cops. It's pretty classic," Chaz mused. "And not just for supervillains."

"So is tracing where your playing cards were bought using Internet technology," Hafidha replied, her fingers flying over her keyboard fast enough that the click of her typing sounded steady as a hum.

Chaz turned one of the baggies over. "They're Bee cards, if that helps."

Hafidha looked up. "Hm?"

"Bee playing cards. The brand."

"How'd you know that?" O'Leary asked; Lau couldn't tell if the note in his voice was awe or faint intimidation.

"I grew up in Las Vegas," Chaz said, without a shred of visible discomfort unless you'd seen him in a hospital bed and learned the frequencies his discomfort could take. "It's like knowing the difference between Chicago deep-dish and New York-style pizza."

O'Leary's impressedness deflated like a sad balloon. Any superpower, sufficiently explained, kind of lost its magic. "I'll let you know if the cameras turn anything up," he said, and excused himself into the hall.

"I think," Tan said, "that we're disappointing him."

"We will have to be better G-men in future," Brady said in stentorian tones, and Lau could have sworn the two of them were about to giggle.

"Right, *bros*," she said, and waited until they settled down. "How are we fighting crime today?"

Chaz took his map out and spread it across the second desk. "I'm going to recenter our crime scenes on the comic store. And the places the cars were stolen, and dumped. If it's his local, that'll give us a good radius for a door-to-door canvass."

"Right. Tan?" she asked, and if he had a thrilling answer, she didn't get to hear it: Detective O'Leary opened the door and strode through heavily, the lines on his face going downright sardonic.

"You know," O'Leary declaimed, "I thought this case was good before."

"It's not?" Lau asked, warily. Not sure yet whether this was the good good, or the downright terrible kind.

"Oh, it gets better," O'Leary said.

"We're looking," Lau said, "for an evil clown. How much better can it get?"

O'Leary dropped a stiff piece of paper, swathed in evidence-bag plastic, on the table. Lau flattened it with one hand. Magazine-cutout letters pasted stiffly onto print-shop paper. *Greetings, fellow protectors of the peace,* it said.

"We've been contacted by a gentleman calling himself the Slamphibian," O'Leary said. "Offering his services to locate our perpetrator."

"The *what* now?" Hafidha said.

"He is, and I quote, 'a dark guardian of our fair city, fighting for justice against the night.'" O'Leary's lip curled. "And he also listed his Facebook and Twitter for us, just in case."

Hafidha took the evidence bag and ran her finger over a few keys. A Wordpress website came up, black background, glaring green type. "He has a website," she said, mouth open with sheer bewildered awe. "And a *scuba suit*."

"And twenty extra pounds around the middle," Chaz said, with a slight air of relief.

"And friends," Lau added, pointing to a link at the bottom of the page.

Hafidha blinked, and every link on the page opened like a shower of fireworks. "InvisiGirl," she read off, in that same slightly concussed tone. "Fireman--not actually a fireman. Tragic Lad. Captain Snazzypants?"

"Apparently it is now a superpower to have good pants," Chaz said over her shoulder.

"I'd believe it," Brady muttered.

"What *is* this?" Hafidha said.

"There's a whole subculture of real-life superheroes out there. They have websites and everything. There's a whole crowd of them out in Seattle," Lau replied, tapping her chin with one finger.

"How do you know these things?" Brady said, bewildered, and O'Leary cast him a grateful look.

"Seminar," she said, and shrugged.

Tan leaned back in his chair; the chair he'd rather sneakily co-opted while everyone else was looking at Captain Snazzypants. "If that's your hobby, a real-life supervillain is probably like Christmas and your birthday and an all-inclusive resort vacation, all at once."

It didn't take much for everyone to catch the drift. "They're going to flip," Chaz said.

"And make this investigation harder than it has to be," Lau added with a frown. "If the amateur Avengers start reacting, it'll just cause our UNSUB to escalate."

"And then someone's gonna get hurt," Brady said.

The hum of typing from Hafidha's desk slowed, stuttered, ceased. She looked up, rubbed her hand across the back of her skull. "Well, maybe not today," she said.

"Oh?" Lau asked.

Hafidha leaned back until her upside-down eyes caught Lau's, and grinned. "I wrote a subroutine to check the money trail for us. And Doctor Volkswagen might be professional, but lucky for us," she said, and tapped a few keys, "his henchmen aren't at all."

*

The light in Interview Three wasn't working quite right. It was too bright, and it flickered. O'Leary flicked the switch off, and then on again. "It's the damn ecofriendly light bulbs," he said to Danny Brady, with a sigh. "The old fixtures don't take them as well as the regular ones."

"It'll have to do," he said, and ducked back behind the mirrored glass pane. "We might as well bring him inside."

The man O'Leary's officers brought into the spare, badly lit room was medium height and burly, and had a face that said "resisting arrest" all over it: short, bristly whiskers, bags under his eyes, and the kind of sneer your mother told you to wipe off your face lest it become permanent. The black muscle shirt and uniform pants just screamed "jailbird." Or "henchman." Or "extra on a 1960s film set."

Nothing that said he'd been dragged out of a 7-Eleven by two uniformed officers at six in the evening for paying for his Big Gulp with a marked bill.

Interviews were all about dramatic timing: the right entrance, the right costume. Playing the part. Brady let him sweat for exactly eleven minutes before striding in, dress shirtsleeves rolled up casually to the elbow, every inch of him radiating authority so complete it didn't even need a suit jacket. The mook--no, Mr. Rahim Kadry of Albany Park--looked up with narrowed eyes.

"Mr. Kadry," Brady said, careful to make it sound distant and dismissive. He slapped down a file folder full of Kadry's vitals on the table between them and opened it. On top of the thin pile of paper sat that marked five-dollar bill.

Kadry saw it, and his face just hardened.

"So," Brady said, and lifted it up by one end, as if it were a dead fish, or a Barbie doll in a grown man's bedroom. "Your explanation for *this*."

"It's five dollars, U.S. currency," Kadry said, with an edged, nervous sneer. "Got seeing problems?"

Brady knew his line here like it was on a teleprompter: *Don't get wise, wise guy*, or something in that neighborhood, and then he could stand up and slam both hands down on the table like he was three days to retirement and his partner's name was John McClane.

"No, I see just fine," he said urbanely, and dealt security camera screen caps out from his folder like five-card stud. "See, because that looks like your nose there. And over there, behind that mask? That's definitely the scar on your right ear."

Kadry twisted around just slightly. Enough to hide his right ear.

"I bet," Brady continued, letting it drawl out, "we could go ask the tellers and customers in that bank, and they'd recognize that voice of yours too."

"Dammit," Kadry said weakly, and then half realizing, shut his mouth tight.

"Dammit," Brady agreed, and snapped his folder crisply shut. "It's not you we're after, Rahim," he said, and laid it on right thick; the full Men in Black treatment. "We're looking for the clown."

Kadry froze mid-twist. "Oh, no way," he said, suddenly absent the whole tough-guy act. "No way are you getting me to roll. I ain't no stoolie."

"Stoolie?" came through the earpiece nestled in Brady's right ear: Hafidha Gates, incredulous. He couldn't argue: This guy hadn't even been born the day the last stool pigeon stooled.

"I'd read you out the charges, and how long that means you could be sitting in a federal prison, but we're all too old for that," Brady said. "You know you're looking at hard time. So do I. Is the clown worth it?"

Kadry was starting to look uncomfortable. "Da boss," he said, pulling the sleeves of his black shirt down around his chunky wrists, "knows better than to tell *me* just where the hideout is."

"Hideout," Hafidha said wonderingly.

"He has," and Tan stopped, to let this sink in, "a *secret hideout*."

"Dammit. Real estate," Hafidha said, and the earpiece crackled slightly as she took it straight off her face.

"The boss," Brady said smoothly; he was too old a hand at this to miss a cue that big. "That'd be Dan Morrison, aka Danny Dare?"

Kadry's pugnacious face wavered into just a regular pug. "You know his secret identity."

"Secret identity," Chaz said over the earpiece. "You think he can project his own mythology?"

"No need to. Comics fandom *is* a shared mythology," Tan pointed out.

"Shh," Lau added, and the peanut gallery fell silent.

Brady said nothing. If he let the silence stretch out enough, it would convert, as if by magic, into *We know a lot of things.*

Kadry wilted a little under that bluff-laced stare. His right foot started a twitching little fidget routine across the gray-painted floor.

"Where's Dan?" Brady asked softly.

Kadry's shoulders sagged. "He's got a storage unit about three miles from his place. That's where we keep all the stuff."

"Stuff?"

"The guns, the bags, the masks. All the stuff you keep in a hideout."

He looked, Brady reflected, truly and completely miserable. "How'd you even get into this?" he asked, and Kadry's head came up.

"There aren't a lot of spots for brown guys in comics," he said, and the resentment in his eyes was in a whole different key from the kind he'd been putting on for Brady's benefit before. "Danny said I do a few jobs, I could probably move up. Get my own handle. We'd team up."

"Team up," Brady echoed. He could feel his eyebrow aching to head upward.

"I was thinking the Elephant. Because, y'know, I don't forget shit." His grin was sudden, and way too young.

The eyebrow rose free.

"Yeah," Kadry said, and the grin faded, "I know it's not that good."

Brady was going off-script, but screw it, he wanted to know: "Why not fight crime instead of doing it?"

Kadry snorted, quietly. "Obviously," he said, in the tones of an argument that had been rehearsed over and over for years, "it's the villains that are the real defined characters in any good comic. Nobody would even care about the heroes if there wasn't a villain there first. Take away the super-crime and they're just poor ordinary bastards with better uniforms than the rest of us."

Brady sat back. The earpiece he was wearing crackled. "Bet you a shiny penny we can go back to that comic store and find every single guy in that car," Arthur Tan said.

"I won't take that bet," Lau mumbled. Brady pictured the phalanx of detectives that would likely descend on Punch in the Face Comics in about twenty minutes flat. He'd never seized the records of a comic store before. *Story to tell the grandkids*, he thought, meditative.

"I can't keep you out of prison," Brady said. "You robbed four banks, and spent a marked bill. They've got you red-handed."

"Should've just made sure I had change for the Slurpee," Kadry mumbled. From the slight reddish stain in his cheeks, Kadry would never need to be told about professional practices in post-heist management again.

"You should have. But you can make this easier on yourself." And here it came, the pitch: "Walk me through. Tell me everything about how this was planned and carried out."

Kadry's eyes widened. "Everything? Like what?"

"Like, say, how you got into the vault." Brady suggested, as if it was just another question, and not *the* most important question.

His suspect seemed to regain a little poise. "Oh, that," he said, and flickered a smile. "See, that's Dan's superpower. He touches the doors and they unlock. Touched the windows on that bank for us the last time, and down they came. It's pretty cool." He screwed up his face. "Except for the time the bank guard got fresh and Dan grabbed the guy's face, zapped his fillings. That was kind of a dick move."

Brady let out a breath. Practically felt the Significant Glance being exchanged on the other side of the mirror.

Devolving. And fast.

"Kind of," Brady agreed. The sounds in his ear were a quiet pandemonium. "Rahim, the detectives here are going to get a pen and paper so we can go over this bit by bit. Would you like a coffee or something when they come in?"

"Yeah," he said, faintly. "That'd be good."

Danny Brady inclined his head, and slipped out of Interview Three. He moved around the corner to where his team watched Rahim Kadry slump onto his folded arms on the flicker-lit table scattered with photographs.

"You got this?" he said to O'Leary, who was watching Kadry with a speculative eye.

"Oh, do I ever," he said, without turning his gaze even a hair's width.

"I've got it." Hafidha's voice came down the hall, five seconds ahead of the printouts in her hand, her bright, set eyes. "Storage facility, one medium locker, rented to a Daniel Morrison. That's his little villain pad."

Lau looked at the printout, at Danny Brady waiting beside her, at the team gathered about the window of Interview Three.

"All right," she said, and patted her gun. "Let's suit up and move out."

Act IV

The superheroes were gathering outside the station.

They were pretty polite for a mob of vigilantes, Chaz reflected. Polite in that wary way that dancers in a goth club were: with the sheer conviction that if they merely loftily ignored the existence of all other comers, everyone would clue in and pay attention to *them*. They staked out their corners of the intersection and parking lot, and the media stared at them from across the street as if it was no-man's-land.

All except one, who was happily in the right turn lane, chatting through his scuba helmet to a nest of cameras.

"Oh look," Chaz Villette said, under his breath. "It's the Slamphibian."

Daniel Brady stifled a very unlovely giggle.

"In fact," he was saying, "I take my duties to the fair city of Chicago extremely seriously." The reporter angled the microphone closer. The scuba suit made him hard to hear. "My hunt for the fiend known as the Alchemist will know no boundaries. Night and day, I will walk the city streets relentlessly, seeking to bring him to justice."

"The Alchemist," Chaz said. "They've given him a name."

"They have given him a name," Lau said.

"These guys thrive on attention. This needs to not be happening."

"Cat's out of the bag," Lau murmured back. "Too late now. And there's a certain elegance to letting the reporters and the superheroes just solve each other. Note how we are walking right past them to the car."

They were, in fact, walking right past the clump of humanity camped out on the station steps. Nobody even turned to look at them. *Must be*, Chaz thought, *the total lack of spandex.*

No one noticed when they got into the two black SUVs, pulled out of the parking area, and drove up the street into the tangle of Chicago.

Chaz rested the map on his skinny thighs--*Dinner, after this*, he reminded himself absently--and called out directions in a monotone voice. North through an old mixed-use neighborhood, into slightly more industrial space; the kind that would be torn down or renovated into *Exciting Loft Living!* the second the economy sputtered back to life.

The streets were deserted. The perfect place for a storage complex. Or for a secret hideout.

Lau pulled into the run-down lot of a low-roofed batch of buildings, the neon sign half burnt out: SP EDY STOR G . Looked at him. "This is it."

Chaz folded up his map and checked his gun. Still there. He climbed out of the passenger seat, shut the door with a soft thump, and formed up ahead of the vest-and-visor-covered SWAT team.

O'Leary met them at the front, and silently proffered the key to unit thirteen. "Thanks," Lau said, and bounced it in her hand. "We all ready?"

It echoed in Chaz's earpiece. Nods around the group: the SWAT officers, Brady, Tan double-checking his vest straps beside him.

"Right then," Lau said, and dropped her voice to a murmur. "Brady, Chaz, out in front please. I'll get the door."

The key to unit thirteen slid into the lock noiselessly; the owner of Speedy Storage, need to buy a vowel or not, kept a tidy ship. Chaz positioned himself on the far side of the door, firearm at the ready, knees bent, legs ready like a sprinter's.

Lau turned it quickly, yanked her hand back.

Brady planted his foot in the center of the door and kicked it wide open.

Chaz wheeled and surged in behind him, eyes going back and forth, back and forth, looking for anything Brady needed to be covered against. The storage unit was dark, shadows shifting, eleven feet by thirteen. The walls were covered--*coated*--with glossy cartoon posters. They crinkled in the wind of Brady's passage.

Desk; heavy gray safe; a single lamp balanced, burning, atop it. And in the light of that lamp, a cadaverous man crouched over a mess of blueprints, his face a halfway mess of makeup smeared and crackling, dripping down his chin.

"You're not *him*--" he said, and snarled, and launched himself at Brady's face.

Brady ducked aside, spun around faster than you'd think a man that big could move. Morrison sprawled on the ground, leaving a smear of white face paint across the concrete. Pushed up to a crouch, his eyes bright and mean.

A flicker in Chaz's blind spot: Arthur Tan, his gun at the ready. "Down! Federal agents!" he said, and Morrison's knees wavered.

"Get down on the ground," Chaz said, sharp and biting, and something in Morrison's head recognized its counterpart and gave: Morrison went to his

knees with his hands high in the air, poised and waiting. For something.

Tan blew out his breath.

"We have the suspect, and we are clear," Chaz said into his collar, and stayed in his shooting stance.

"Daniel Morrison," Brady said, still staccato with adrenaline, and the clown's head whipped up, sharp, surprised. "You have the right to remain silent." He holstered his weapon and approached slow and deliberate. Reached out for the cuffs looped at the belt below his vest.

Morrison lunged.

Brady caught the one hand mid-flight, slapped a cuff around it. The other deked, dodged, pushed past him. Clamped on to his jaw.

Somewhere, behind them, someone let out a startled shout.

Morrison's eyes narrowed--everyone looked different while jamming--and his grin stretched wide and grotesque. Those gloved fingers tightened on Brady's cheeks, his chin.

Chaz Villette's stomach turned over. His fingers went automatically to the trigger; he lined up the shot.

"Morrison, stand down!" he said, squeezing the trigger soft enough for a breath to tip the whole thing over. He could get the head shot from here. It was so close he didn't even need to try. "Put your hands up in the air!"

And then Brady reared up, shook off the hand, and bent it behind Morrison's back. *Click* went the cuffs. "Ma Brady didn't raise a son who got cavities," he said sternly, and hauled Morrison up to his feet. "Nice try."

"*Shit*," Dan Morrison said, suddenly confused, and sagged as the SWAT team swarmed.

*

Dan Morrison filled out Interview Three much better than his sidekick, Chaz decided. He sat straight and tall and flicked his eyes around the room quickly, with a manic, bitten grin on his white-caked face.

The double-wide cuffs and leg manacles weren't hurting his image either.

He needs to touch you, Chaz reminded himself as Danny Brady and Nikki Lau sat down in the opposite chairs. Kids who drove getaway cars were one thing, but for a gamma, one who'd already gone after the arresting agent? You wanted at least two people in the room, and you wanted them armed.

For the first time on the case, Chaz felt how paper-thin the numbers guarding

his back had become. Found himself wishing terribly that Falkner or Reyes were there.

"Mr. Morrison," Brady started, rumbling and deep and with a decided twang. So he had decided to be Bad Cop today. It made sense. There was a light bruise running along his jawline, turning slowly purple. "You're in a lot of trouble. Bank robbery runs up long prison terms. And no parole."

Morrison's face, under the ruined paint, did not even flicker.

"It'll get a lot easier for you if you cooperate," Lau added.

Nope, Chaz thought. *Nothing.*

"We know you got fired from the scrapyard," Lau said. "After the accident. And we know it wasn't your fault."

For the first time, Morrison's face spasmed. Twin muscles in his neck twitched with the effort of holding still. And even so, his hands closed into fists inside the manacles; closed tight.

"I'm not," he said, in a voice devoid of humor, "going to talk to *you* about *that*."

"The coroner's report said the bottom car was badly rusted," Lau said soothingly. "There was no way you could have known it was unsafe."

"You want me to talk?" Morrison said, and bared dirty teeth. "Well. Bring *him* around, and we'll talk."

The staring contest across the table lasted ten more minutes before Chaz let the mirror, tinily, inchingly up.

He wasn't just indifferent. He was *waiting.*

And utterly, completely resolute.

Chaz tapped gently on the glass, and Brady and Lau heard it. Closed their files, and came outside.

"It's not going to work," he said, and wrung his hands. "He's waiting for someone, or something, and until it shows up he's not saying a word."

Brady glanced back over his shoulder, through the two-way mirror. Chaz could practically feel Morrison glaring at them right through it. "I'm just going to make you do this every time I do an interview. It'll save me valuable coffee time."

Hafidha snorted from her perch in the corner, next to Tan. "And cost you a fortune in Slim Jims."

Lau waved them both off distractedly. "We need an in here. We have maybe three hours before Chicago field office comes by and informs us that he's their baby."

"But it's our case," Hafidha scowled.

Lau shrugged, infinitesimal. "Four robberies, that high profile, and with an all-new, all-different way of waltzing right past high-tech vault doors? The FDIC is probably having kittens right now. We *have* to prove that what Morrison does isn't replicable if we want to ever get him through the doors of Idlewood."

"Even if it's going to be suppressed." Hafidha's voice was flat. Chaz snuck a glance over. So was her face.

"Especially if it's going to be suppressed," Lau said, and started toward their borrowed, drab gray office. Chaz trailed behind her, and wasn't halfway to the door before he caught a smell better than sex, a full night's sleep, and sex again in the morning.

"Oh hey there," Hafidha said, and opened the door, and there was O'Leary, arranging a stack of pizza boxes with the most incredible heat coming off them.

"I thought it'd been a long time since you'd eaten," O'Leary said. "And you mentioned, well."

"Detective?" Chaz said. "Bless you," and reached into the top box for about five slices.

*

"Here's what I don't get," Tan said, around a bite of deep-dish pizza. "He turned steel into peanut brittle. Those cuffs aren't stopping him, and neither is the door. Why isn't he trying to break himself out?"

Chaz turned his head slowly; regarded Arthur Tan. "Now," he said, "*that* is a good question."

Tan took the praise well. A twitch of the lips, at the corners. Not even a trace of an attempt to duck it, or take over the conversation by force.

"What's he waiting for?" Brady mused aloud. "He doesn't *want* to get caught, or he'd have been sloppier with his countermeasures. No hideout, no stolen getaway cars, no problem spending the money."

"'We're not *him*,'" Lau said, quoting softly. "More like *who's* he waiting for?"

Chaz sat bolt upright on the desk. The metal shrieked underneath him, and he leaped off the furniture.

It did nothing. He sat down again, cautiously. Cleared his throat.

"We don't fit," he said. "Supervillains getting apprehended by diligent police work, read their Miranda rights, and tried in a court of law isn't part of his mythology."

"Origin story," Brady corrected.

"Shut up," Chaz replied. "He's not interested in us. He's waiting for a superhero."

"Aren't we all, baby?" Hafidha said, and Chaz diligently wadded up the wrapper from his straw and threw it at her head. She fended it off with her palm; oil from the pizza glistened down her fingers. "Damn, I need a napkin."

"Hold on," Tan said, "I'll get some," and ducked out the door.

Hafidha watched him go. "Down the Hall's trained that guy a little too well."

"He's just trying to be nice," Lau said, and held her own greasy hands over the paper plate. "It's not his fault Blaze tries to make every new agent the BAU gets his personal assistant."

"Sidekick," Brady put in.

"I swear," Chaz said, and opened two boxes looking for a spare scrap of mozzarella.

Hafidha watched his fingers thoughtfully. "So you're saying what he'll respond to is some manly chinface in a cape, not us. And until we get him one, he's not going to talk."

"Yeah," Chaz said, closing on a dribble of cheese. "And we have an answer to this." He gestured with his chin to Hafidha's rig. "The Slamphibian. Get him in, coach him up, and get this done."

Lau pulled a wearied face, shook her head. "We can't legitimize that. As much as it's probably just dress-up, they're still extralegal vigilantes, and if we endorse one Mom will have our heads even before Celentano sharpens his guillotine."

"Celentano's guillotine is always sharp," Hafidha said dryly. Chaz took a moment to be briefly very thankful that Arthur Tan was in the precinct kitchen for the insubordination segment of the day.

"Not to mention," Brady said, "they're nothing but regular guys in funny mascot suits. Morrison, for all that he's still working his way up to gamma first base, is still a gamma."

"A gamma in the middle of the story he wants most to be in," Lau said slowly.

"So he's happy. His back is nowhere near the wall."

"What're you thinking?" Brady said, because they had been working together long enough that he could of course tell when she was thinking *something*.

"I'm thinking Chaz is right: what we have to do is keep him in the story he wants to be in. And he'll cooperate, and we don't have to fire any bullets into anybody today, and end this thing tidily."

"The question is, how?" Chaz said.

There was a nagging detail. Chaz was missing something important, something crucial, and--

"Tan does voices," Brady said suddenly, and Chaz sat up straight. Realizing slowly, madly, what might just make this work. "He did Christian Bale in the car."

"He did what?" Hafidha said, bemused.

"It was really good, too. Spot-on," Brady added.

"Interviews," Chaz pointed out, "are all about playing the part anyway."

He saw the second when Lau caught on; her eyes warmed, slowly, speculatively. "We don't need a fake superhero if we have a *fake* fake superhero," Lau said, wonderingly. "Tan could do it."

"Tan," Arthur Tan said, coming back into the office with a whole sheaf of dining hygiene products, "could do what?"

"You do voices?" Lau said, and Tan cracked a faintly embarrassed smile.

"Ain't I a stinker," he said, and waggled his eyebrows, Bugs Bunny-style.

Lau grinned, bright and brief. "Do you think," she said, "you could pull off a good superhero?"

The eyebrows flattened out fast. "Not to be insubordinate, but what are you all plotting at?"

"We're not plotting," Chaz said. "I can see it on your nasty little profiler faces," he replied, cheery. Wary. *Smart guy.*

"Morrison's not going to respond to us. He's waiting for some superhero to come in and declare victory over his vanquished criminal enterprise. How would you feel," Lau said carefully, "about a solo interview? And a little playacting?"

"Oh, no way," Tan said, immediate. The napkins hung in his hand, forgotten.

"You did that impression in the car," Brady said. "It was good. It might get Morrison where he belongs."

Tan looked at them all, one by one, eyebrows up. Wavering.

Lau picked up the extension phone and punched three numbers. "Detective O'Leary?" she said into the receiver. "Are there any costume shops close by?"

*

The cowl smelled like stale beer and sweat. And neither had belonged to Arthur Tan.

This was, he decided, unfair.

"You'd think someone would have cleaned this thing between Halloween and now," he said. His voice was only faintly muffled by the way the mask pressed on his cheekbones.

"It's off-season. There's no point," Villette said, and pawed, for some reason, at Tan's left shoulder. "Hold still; I have to get the cape hooked on."

"Cape," Tan said, and held still. The weight settled more symmetrically about his shoulders. "I don't know how anyone expects to pass a field fitness test in one of these things."

"Lucky for you, you don't have to," Villette said, and gave the cape one last tug. "How's your earpiece?"

"Fine," Tan said, and shoved it into place through the stiff fabric of the cowl.

"Great," Lau added, from the corner. "Now, let's just hope he's not one of those nerd-racists who said Heimdall couldn't be black."

"You're deshpicable," Tan muttered, and took an experimental step. The costume clung to his legs in odd, uncomfortable ways. *It's only for a few minutes, Tan old boy*, he told himself, sighing. *And it is for great justice.*

He waddled out of the conference room, down the hall to Interview Three, and opened the door.

*

The cape swished. It swirled and puddled about Tan's legs as he walked into Interview Three, clear on the other side of the glass, and stopped in a foot-planted pose that out-alphaed any alpha males inside a ten-mile radius of the greater Chicago area.

Morrison's eyes lit up. He would have pushed to his feet if his hands hadn't been cuffed tidily to the table. *"You,"* he said, and spat on the floor.

"Oh, great," O'Leary said. Lau could see him dreaming of mops.

"Alchemist," Tan said, with a depth of grim and gravel that made Lau's stomach shudder. That voice couldn't come out of that man. It was *uncanny.*

"I knew you'd have to respond eventually," Morrison said, and let out a high-pitched giggle that unnerved for all the wrong reasons. "None of them could stop me. They don't have what it takes; they won't go *far enough*."

Lau shifted her weight on the other side of the glass. She didn't want to know how far was far enough. Or how this might have escalated. "Ask him," she murmured, "how he did it."

Tan got the message. He crossed gloved arms over his chest and stared down at Morrison's seated, crunched-up form. "There's one thing that racks my brain," Tan said, cold and raspy and even. "How you did it."

"Oh, ho," Morrison said, and grinned as wide as he could; it looked like a recipe for face sprain. "You *couldn't* figure out my master plan. How many nights I've slaved, refining my dark powers; how much steel I've reduced to dust with nothing but the touch of a finger."

Tan snorted. "I don't believe you. You used chemicals. We'll find them soon enough."

Morrison's nostrils flared wide. "Stupid vigilante. You think I need chemicals?" He reached down, grabbed the chain that linked his cuffs and anklets. A sharp hissing sound carried through the interview room, over the speaker.

The steel reduced to powder, to nothing. Clanked to the floor.

"Looks like you're still cuffed to the table," Tan observed, and Morrison snarled.

"Well, this is a whole different side of the gentleman," O'Leary said from the corner.

"You see what I can do? Your bars can't hold me! Your boxes won't keep me in!" Morrison's grin was more like a rictus now, taut and vicious. "I did it *myself*, and I spent a whole month in that scrapyard practicing it *myself*, and once I'm done, none of you are *ever* going to tell me what I can or can't do again—"

"Villain monologue," Hafidha mumbled. "Oh, no *kidding*."

"Like telling you you can't work at the yard anymore," Tan said evenly, "because those cars rusted out and fell, and that kid died?"

"It wasn't my fault," he shouted, and slammed his cuffed feet on the floor.

"It's just your fault that you robbed three banks," Tan said.

"Four," Morrison spat, "and I'll do it again."

"And that's a videotaped confession," Brady said, and smacked his fist into his palm like a personal high five.

Tan slouched, almost detectably. Relief. "We're done here, Alchemist."

Morrison stuck up his white-gloved hands. "You've foiled me this time," he said, and grinned extra wide. "But you'll never find the loot."

Chaz Villette's face went blank, briefly. "It's in his comics collection," he said. "One bill per page. He spent the whole night sliding them in and putting them back in their little plastic bags."

Brady's heavy blond eyebrow rose.

"Carefully," Chaz added. "So the corners didn't crease."

"I'll get that search warrant drawn up, then," O'Leary said, and made a note on his battered pad.

"It's not about the loot. We're putting you away, Alchemist," Tan said from behind the mask, softly, almost meditative. "For a long, long time."

Morrison cackled, once, sharp. "Oh, I'll be back," he said, with an undercurrent of sheer, childish, wide-eyed glee. "Just like a bad smell, I'll *always* be back."

Tan himself might have waved a hand to brush it off, or cracked wise. Tan's costumed secret identity just looked down his molded vinyl nose at Morrison for a long, long moment, and stalked crisply out the door.

"Good?" he said when he came around the corner. His voice sounded hoarse and a bit weary.

"Double-plus good," Lau said, and gave him a small, sharp nod. "Extra good."

"Right," he said. "Someone get this sweatshop off of me?" and Chaz Villette nodded, and led him back into the men's room to change.

O'Leary watched Morrison fidget at the table through the glass. "This your usual day?" he asked, only a little strained.

Lau grinned. "Not even close," she said. They hadn't had to shoot anyone all week now. "Our central office will fax the transfer papers to our secure facility over, and get custody assigned formally."

O'Leary nodded, and reached out to shake her hand. She took it, and it wasn't so eager this time: solid, professional. "Thanks for the work. I"--he

paused--"don't think we would have pulled it off ourselves."

Wrong profile, he was trying to say. And didn't quite have the everyday jargon for it. "Not to worry," Lau said, and returned the smile. "That's what we're here for."

It didn't take long to pack up: files, computers, the video from that interview room, all safely tucked away in suitcases. And of course, Dan Morrison, handed over to the field office for formal transport to Ashton, Virginia. They'd barely been in town a day, Lau realized. She hadn't even checked in to the hotel.

"Best. Case. Ever," Hafidha said as they trudged down the stairwell to the parking lot, where their two black SUVs sat waiting to take them to O'Hare.

"Best?" Chaz replied, bumping his wheeled suitcase behind him. "You never know what could happen. We could be called in to inspect three-eyed fish. Or suspicious dirigible deaths."

"Best," she said, and hopped down to the ground floor door.

There was a uniformed officer guarding it from the outside; he turned as Lau pushed the door open, and waved them back. "We'll have to ask you to wait a moment, please. I'm sorry, agents. It won't be long."

"What," Brady said, "is the holdup?"

It took a moment before the officer cracked the door wider, and Lau saw what the holdup was.

Rumpled, chained, Dan Morrison was being escorted out of the Racine Avenue police station under heavy armed guard: one officer to each limb, approximately, and all of them holding on tight. Lau watched them go. He didn't even turn his head to look at them. They weren't *him*, and he didn't care.

Morrison bounced in the officers' grip. He wasn't resisting. He was *skipping*.

"I feel," Chaz said conversationally, "like we have just done a kind of terrible thing."

"He did steal a few million dollars," Brady said.

"Akin to kicking a puppy," Chaz said. "Or taking ice cream away from a very small child."

"We've safely quarantined a gamma," Lau said, voice low. "And now we get to go home."

Act V

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC, July 25, 2012

Daniel Brady stopped by Arthur Tan's desk twenty minutes after official FBI closing time, when nobody in the FBI had actually gone home yet but it wasn't treason to start thinking about it. He was even less obtrusive out of the field: hovered genially out of the way until Tan finished his sentence on the report he was writing and turned to acknowledge his presence.

"Jock," Tan said, pleasantly.

"Nerd," Brady replied, and pulled up Pauley's desk chair. "How's life back in the Muggle world?"

"Grim," Tan said, and waved his new case file. "Human trafficking sucks. It sucks the worst of all things."

Brady did not argue. Tan had learned since joining the BAU that there were more worst things in the world than fetishes on the Internet, and they were all still the worst.

"How's life at Hogwarts?" he asked instead.

"Good," Brady replied, shockingly enough. "Dan Morrison's settled into Idlewood, and it looks like the lawyer the court appointed for him is going to take a mental health plea and let him stay. Dr. Ramachandran says Morrison's actually quite well-behaved and cooperative."

"Biding his time for the inevitable Arkham jailbreak," Tan said in an ominous voice.

Brady nodded. "Unfortunately for Morrison, nobody busts villains out of Idlewood to keep the story going for another hundred issues."

He cut off the last syllable too fast. Tan restrained himself from cocking an eyebrow: *That we know of*, floated into the subtext. He looked disturbed.

Briefly, Arthur Tan wondered what Agent Brady was hiding.

"Anyways. I just wanted to thank you. I know you're still finding your feet with the kind of cases we do, and you really brought that one in."

Tan's eyebrow rose. There was clearly more coming. He knew the difference between an intermission and the end of the show.

"I'm telling you this," Brady said, "because we have an empty ACTF position posting tonight. And I think you might want to look at it."

Everything in Tan's head stopped. Even the part about what he wanted for dinner.

"Hold on," he said. "You guys want *me* to--"

"My personal opinion only," Brady said quickly, and held up both hands. "And you probably know that there are...limitations to a career move Down the Hall."

That had been obvious, Tan reflected, from the very first day. It was always him or Pauley who talked to the ACTF, never Blaze or Lisa. He was the new kid; he got the scut work, no matter how tight a unit the BAU was.

And Pauley, well. Pauley wasn't *ambitious*. Not that way. Not the way people marked ambition normally at the Bureau.

"But," Brady added, "you'd be good at it. You think your way around problems. And you weren't too hung up on certain things to get the job done right."

"Like my dignity?" he said, and waggled his eyebrows. "Aw, shucks, stranger."

His heart wasn't in it. Like his dignity; like procedure; like the technical rules of extradition to a private facility, where he didn't quite know what would happen to someone who had, yes, committed a crime.

Suddenly, Tan wasn't sure this all was a compliment.

"I," he said, cautious and polite, "would really need to think about that."

Brady didn't get offended. He seemed to catch all the laugh tracks going through Tan's face, and nodded. "You should, yes." He stood, pushed Pauley's chair back where it belonged. "Goodnight, Nerd."

"Jock," Tan said formally.

The link was where Brady had said it was: a fresh posting to the Bureau internal jobs site. Tan hovered his cursor over the link. The job description inside would undoubtedly be written in the vaguest terms possible: not a word about superpowers or fighting evil, or the things he'd seen in that bunker--the cages, the fear--or the way the agents from Down the Hall had barely seemed to feel it. How they'd looked at those things as if they weren't the worst thing they'd ever seen before.

As if there were worse things.

Tan was reasonably ambitious. He'd hustled hard to move up from bomb squad, and, well, he had a family to help support. But he was also--grimly, terribly, morbidly--curious.

He closed the intranet browser. Padma. He had to check with her first.

He had to talk to his wife.

*

The office had emptied out by the time Lau tapped on Esther Falkner's office door, the one kept propped perpetually open in case of emergency or need for a spare breeze. Falkner looked up and saw Lau hovering in that neutral space on the wooden threshold, and waved her inside. "Come on in."

"You wanted to see me?" Lau said. Her face was neutral: not holding back a real whopper, this time, but just unsure what to say.

"I looked at everyone's reports," Falkner said, and motioned for Lau to sit. She hesitated, and then sprawled gratefully in one of Falkner's plush guest chairs. "You did a good job: kept everyone on point and moving, and brought in our gamma alive and cooperative, without any collateral damage."

"It was an easy case," she said.

"It was a case with a lot of potential to go volatile and a lot of unpredictable moving parts," Falkner corrected, "and the fact that they neatly canceled each other out means good situation management, not that the job was somehow easier. Don't minimize that," she added mildly.

Lau had the good grace to flush.

"I just don't know that I can take credit, here. I wasn't really all that in charge," Lau said. "Everyone knows what they're supposed to do. We just did it."

Falkner sat and watched her until her face changed slowly. It took about thirty seconds.

Lau chuckled, quietly, like someone who just found their glasses sitting on their head where they'd lost them. "Now I am a Jedi, hm?"

"Wax on, wax off," Falkner replied dryly. "I'm putting in a recommendation. It has to go through Celentano, of course, but I'm going to push for a promotion to SSA on your next review."

That did the trick; the brightness came back into her eyes. "Agent Falkner--" she started, and then stopped. "Esther. Thank you."

Falkner smiled, halfway. "You're due," she said.

It was true. Nicolette Lau had come into the ACTF too early to understand that the time away from home, the trauma, the suspect kill rates were astronomical compared to most every other branch of the Bureau. That this wasn't normal. That they didn't live real life.

"You won't regret it," Lau said, and rose; and from the hint of steel in her voice, Falkner was entirely sure she wouldn't.

"Never thought it for a second," she said, and shifted in her seat. "Go on home. I've got to beat it anyways. Ben's making pad thai for dinner."

Lau saluted--half ironic, maybe---and took herself out the door.

Falkner leaned back in her chair. Easy case? Maybe. But there was no more inappropriate deference in Nikki Lau's step, and no more worry in her shadow.

It was good for kids, growing up. To let them do a thing for themselves, and realize that they *could.*

Yeah, Falkner thought, as she shut down her computer and locked her desk drawer. They were going to be fine.

Decision

Franconia, VA, July 25, 2012

Arthur Tan walked through the front door of his condo with his messenger bag and two big paper sacks, calling in his best Ricky Ricardo, "Lucy! I'm home!"

Naima was the first into the hall, helpfully clarifying, "Amma! Baba's home!" as she hurtled toward him with their Beagle at her heels. He managed to set his bags on the side table just before thirty-two pounds of everything nice knocked the breath out of him.

Catching her in his arms, he said, "Hey, Pirate. Did you and Bartleby have a great day?" Then, still holding her, he stooped to scratch Bartleby behind the ears.

As Naima nodded solemnly, Padma came from their bedroom, already changed from her work clothes into turquoise capris and a white T-shirt. She looked at the bags and said, "I see the hunting was good, mighty provider."

He grinned and stood with Naima still in his arms. "Tonight's a taste-off for the adults. For the warm-up act, spring rolls versus satay. For the main event, potatoes and mock duck versus massaman curry versus spicy chicken with basil versus calamari pad Thai. And for an encore bout, sticky rice with mangoes versus green tea ice cream. To drink, your choice of ginger apple cider or Singha."

Padma said, "There'll be enough leftovers for two meals, at least. Which is not a complaint."

Arthur rubbed his nose against his daughter's and added, "And for somebody extra-special, there's the traditional Thai pirate dish." He reached into one bag and pulled out a Happy Meal box.

Naima clapped. "Yay!"

Padma glanced at him and said, a little too politely, "Naima, would you like to watch Spongebob while we get dinner ready?"

Arthur thought, *Busted.* Padma was speaking the secret adult language in which the tone, not the words, mattered. Her message could not be clearer: She knew he had something to say. He had hoped it could wait until after Naima's bedtime. Which, he realized now, had been wishful thinking at its most naive.

He carried the food into the kitchen and began setting the table for three. The Spongebob theme song began in Naima's room, and then Padma walked into

the dining nook, saying, "You never told me you were Greek."

"That's racist." He smiled.

She didn't. "Tell it to the Trojans. What are you trying to buy?"

"You know I love you."

"Yes, and you know I love you, and while Spongebob can keep Naima entertained for hours, I'd really like to eat soon."

"I've been offered a job."

"Back in the bomb squad?"

"Worse."

Padma was so still that he was afraid to say more, but after a moment, he added, "And more important."

"You said 'offered'."

He nodded.

"Which means you don't have to take it."

He nodded again.

"Will it help your career if you take it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. No one says taking it is a fast track to Hawaii."

"But you really want to take it."

He nodded because that seemed to work better than words could.

"What is it?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you."

She laughed, a snort that would have seemed disdainful to a stranger. "Somebody doesn't know you."

"Maybe. SSA Falkner said I wasn't supposed to tell you. She didn't say I couldn't tell you."

"And?"

"You know how Nick Fury recruited superheroes to fight unimaginable threats?"

This time her laugh was pure delight. "Captain America, you're never going to convince me you've been asked to join the Avengers."

He felt himself blush. "Uh, it's more like S.H.I.E.L.D."

"And Falkner is Nick Fury?"

"Maybe the analogy isn't very good."

With no smile at all, Padma said, "Was Daphne Worth Agent Coulson?"

"I don't know if the ACTF is the FBI's most dangerous unit, but there's field work, weird hours, and risk."

"Can someone else do it?"

"They didn't offer it to anyone else."

"Oh, Wart."

He would never understand how she could go so quickly from being mad to pressing her lips against his in a firm, tongueless kiss that was more intimate than any sexual kiss could be.

She pushed him back. "Threats like terrorists?"

"Threats like something I really shouldn't tell a journalist."

"Off the record stays off the record."

"Okay." So he told her all he had seen and heard, and he watched her expressions change from "You're joking" to "You're crazy or I am" to "This is real and fucked up and terrifying."

She said, "You can't do this."

He nodded. "I know."

"They can get someone else."

"Sure," he agreed, and kept looking into her eyes.

She glanced down, twisted a long lock of hair by her right ear, then looked toward Naima's room. He thought, *I am going to have a solid, conventional fibbie career. There's a lot to be said for that.*

She met his gaze and said softly, "Okay."

He started to nod, then realized he had failed to hear what was meant in the language of tone. "Okay, I'm not taking the job, or okay, I am?"

"Promise you won't be a hero. Wait. Promise you won't be a stupid hero. Naima needs her father."

He smiled. "I'm planning to be around to see the Pirate graduate from a great

university and start her life with someone I will never completely believe deserves her."

"Wart?"

"Yes, Peanut?"

"If Falkner had said you couldn't tell me, would you've told me anyway?"

"No." As her frown reappeared, he realized that this time, the failure in the language of tone had been his. He added, "I wouldn't have told you. And I wouldn't have taken the job."

"You think she knew that?"

He stared at Padma, then said, "Huh. Maybe Falkner is Nick Fury."

Padma smiled slightly. "I'll get the Pirate. Finish setting the table, Agent Hill."

4.07 "Underworld" - by Elizabeth Bear

Click here to play music.

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Chapter 17: UNDERWORLD

(rough only)

In the summer of 1972, I was nineteen years old. The same age, it turns out, as Michael Dominic Bellamo. But while I was between semesters at Penn State--and soon to leave it for a career change I'm still legally bound not to discuss--Michael Bellamo was embarking on his own education as a serial killer.

He hadn't yet graduated: his first known stranger murder would not be committed until January 15th, 1975. But on June 1st, 1972, he matriculated.

The FBI became involved in the case in 2012, a year and a half after his death.

#

The governor of the state of Connecticut in June of 1972 was Republican Thomas Meskill. The president of the United States of America was Richard Nixon.

Michael Bellamo's home, at that time, was the family's white frame residence on Wethersfield Avenue in Hartford's South End. The house's flat, treeless yard was surrounded by a three-foot chain link fence so threaded with roses that in summer the heavy, drowsy scent floated halfway down the block. Serafina Bellamo had planted those roses as a young bride. They had been slender, spindling things then. By 1972, they had to be knocked back twice a year with hedge trimmers, and on this particular June day

they were in heavy bloom.

When Serafina Bellamo came down the basement steps to find her grandson Michael, a recent graduate of Bulkeley High, doing the laundry, there were three Hartford PD black-and-whites lined up along the curb beside those roses, the strobes on the rear one cycling lazily.

"Michael," she said. "What are you doing?"

(We know what she said, or at least what he said she said, because Michael Bellamo kept extensive--one might even say narcissistic--journals. He transcribed the conversation more or less verbatim, inasmuch as you can trust anything a serial killer writes. Every journalist has an agenda. Bellamo's was to glorify himself.)

"Laundry," Bellamo records that he replied.

Mrs. Bellamo, it must be reported, was no dummy. Family accounts, even adjusted for the rosiness imparted by forty years of hindsight, all agree that the old lady was sharp as a tack until her dying day. They also agree that Michael never lifted a finger around the house.

So why did she merely give Michael--as he records--a gimlet eye, and sniff from her perch on the penultimate step before declaring, "You *would* pick the day our Celia doesn't come home to do one nice thing for your mother."

As if that were a bad thing, Michael Bellamo wrote in his journal, dated 6/1/72. *For a guy to help out his mom.*[1]

#

Despite her grandmother's careful euphemism, the problem wasn't merely that Celia Falcone hadn't come home.

It was that the police had just taken her mother and father--Michael's mother's sister and her husband--to identify the body.

#

Michael Bellamo was tall, handsome, and dark-haired. He was a B student during his high school career. Teachers said he was bright, but didn't apply himself. He told his widowed mother that he was debating college or trade school and wanted to take a year off, which was why he was working part-time as a bagger at a neighborhood grocery and living with his mother and grandmother.

And he had been sexually abusing his female cousins--there were about a dozen in the sprawling Bellamo/Falcone/Tagliabue clan--since he was approximately thirteen years old.

These crimes were never reported and never prosecuted because he kept it in the family. We may wonder, charitably, if the blind eye so turned was a case of unconscious denial. What we cannot wonder about is what his grandmother, the widowed matriarch of the clan, did next.

On the day her granddaughter was murdered and found dumped in Colt Park, on the banks of the Connecticut River, Mrs. Bellamo discovered her grandson performing household cleaning that he otherwise would have disdained. As near as my team were able to determine, she never reported this incident, and went to her grave (in 1991) without ever discussing it.

Michael recorded that when she asked what he was washing and he told her "sheets," she explained to him the proper way in which to add the bleach.

It's not conclusive, of course, but it's suggestive. If she had reported it, it might have been enough to link Michael to what we now believe to have been his first murder, thus saving the lives of at least twenty-seven other young women--not to mention preventing the continuation of his abuse and the extension of its legacy to his cousins, his wife, and eventually his daughters.

#

Does Serafina Bellamo bear some of the culpability for her grandson's crimes? Maybe not. My years in

the FBI have made me loath to assign blame or even particularly complex motives to people I do not know well and have not interviewed. So no, she is not culpable.

But if you asked me if she bore some of the *guilt*... that's a question I could answer in the simple affirmative. Or at least with a hell of a lot less temporizing.

Whatever the reason for Mrs. Bellamo's choice, it ensured that Celia Falcone was merely the first to die. And Celia Falcone's death--or more precisely the investigation into her death--scared Bellamo into better covering his tracks.

It's a truism of investigations of serial murder that most of the usual tricks don't work. Most murders are solved--if they will be solved--in the first forty-eight hours after they are committed. But serial murders are often cold, cold, cold by the time the authorities become involved. Most murders are crimes of passion; somebody who loves or hates or fears or desires or wishes to be free of somebody else, or who owes them money, or who is owed money by them, realizes that if they just bump the bastard off, they'll never have to try to explain their decisions to him or her again. Serial murders are crimes of opportunity: the right victim in the right place at the right time, with the right level of vulnerability.

Bellamo learned from his near miss. He'd learned that it was safe to *rape* family members, because they could be effectively silenced--by shame, by social pressure, by his mother's and grandmother's unwillingness to hear the truth. But it was not safe to kill someone and leave the body where it could be discovered. Especially someone who could be linked to him by blood or passion.

He'd learned that he needed to get smart.

#

When the Anomalous Crimes Task Force "away team" arrived in Hartford in August of 2012, we did not

know the case we were about to become involved in would lead us to a forty-year-old series of serial killings. We were riding high off a recent success with the Morrison case in Chicago, and feeling something closer to full strength with the return of Hafidha Gates to field work and the full-time addition of Arthur Tan to the team.

The Hartford PD request that had brought us in was actually in regards to a disappearance that they suspected might be linked to a pair of cold cases--one murder, one missing person--connected because they involved members of the same household. Acting on the advice of SSA Lau, the BAU had recently expanded the remit of cases we were encouraged to investigate to include those that showed a pattern of crimes involving family members or members of a social group.

The recent disappearance was that of Serafina Bellamo. The cold crimes were the murder of Celia Falcone in 1972 and the disappearance of Michael Bellamo in 2010, shortly following his divorce.

#

Hartford, the capital of the state of Connecticut, is a fairly typical mid-sized Eastern city in post-millennial transition. Situated roughly a third of the way from Boston to New York City, its population is a little over a hundred thousand souls as of this writing--but the population of the metro area is over 1.2 million. As one might surmise from these statistics, its small geographic area and decades of white flight have left it largely a commuter city, with the remaining residents struggling with poverty and lack of services. Hartford has struggled to define itself in the modern era.

Our team arrived at Brainard Airport at 1:15 am on a Friday in August. As we disembarked into the darkest hour of night, more than one of us remarked upon an oppressive stickiness that hung over the tarmac, holding the reek of petrochemicals close to the earth.

We were seven: SSA Brady, SSA Falkner, SA Villette,

SSA Gates, SSA Lau, SA Tan, and myself. There had been some discussion of leaving SA Tan behind at the Hoover building to learn the anchor position. He'd served in that capacity for the regular BAU, but the W.T.F.'s needs were--as you might expect--somewhat different. However, in the end he accompanied us into the field.

As desperately as we all missed Daphne Worth--her absence was still the kind of hole where we'd catch ourselves creating the silence in the conversation that her remark should have filled--it was inexpressibly good to have Gates back on the job. We were starting to wear back in around her, to lose our wariness--even Brady. There was every evidence that the treatments had successfully reversed the progress of her disease, at least partially, and every test, every scan, showed positive results. She would always have to be careful--we would always have to be careful--but the evidence was seeming to offer a better and better chance that Gates could live a full and functional life.

We were met at the bottom of the steps from the aircraft by Marina Ruiz, the Hartford P.D. detective who had been in contact with Lau and Falkner. A slight woman with a creamy complexion and impressive forearms, she offered firm handshakes all around. I happen to recall that Gates and Villette were engaged in their usual debate about where to go to get edible takeout at two in the morning.

Ruiz winced, obviously having overheard. "I'm afraid Hartford's options are limited. But... Pietro's delivers pizza until 3 am on Thursdays. If we call ahead--"

"Spoken like a true police officer," Villette replied. "Lead us to the pizza."

"And the car," said Lau. "We're eager to hit the ground running."[2]

#

The Hartford Police Headquarters is a squat, sprawling red brick building that resembles a public

high school built in the 1970s. It inhabits the bitter end of Jennings Road, in the industrial North Meadows neighborhood where its neighbors include Interstate 91, the city landfill, a strip club, several car dealerships, a school bus parking lot, and the sort of "boutique" where patrons may enjoy some alone time in private booths provided at the back. In the middle of the night, it's an eerie place, especially limned in a police van's headlights.

Detective Ruiz parked our incomparably elegant conveyance behind the cop shop and led us inside. As has become customary, our home away from home was a repurposed conference room--but it had plenty of table space, a plug for Gates' laptop, and its own coffee maker--and, by the time we'd settled in, a pile of pizza boxes that left Ruiz tilting her head like a quizzical doe.

"There's plenty for you," Gates said, as she pulled the box of a large pepperoni with extra cheese and fresh garlic in front of her chair.

"I'll bring friends," Ruiz said, but she did take a slice on a paper plate.[3]

As the team ate, we reviewed what we knew against what Ruiz could tell us, as is our standard procedure. While we review case files thoroughly in transit, there are often details that emerge during personal conversation that investigating officers deemed too fiddly, too unsubstantiated, too insignificant, or too weird to be entered into the formal case notes.

In this case, Ruiz confirmed what we had already known. But she did have some further information. She was able to inform us that while Michael Bellamo, the missing person of two years ago, had never been charged, he'd been a person of interest in several investigations over the years--beginning with the murder of his cousin Celia, the older of the two cold cases linked to the current disappearance.

"We all know the son of a bitch was raping underage

girls," she said. "I checked with cops that retired as far back as 1982. The investigating officer on Falcone's murder--Bobby Raimen, rest his soul--interviewed Bellamo twice. But he never had enough to hold him, never mind charging him. And nobody else has even gotten that close. He seemed to have a knack for picking girls who'll clam up about it."

"Successful predators often do," Lau said between fork-and-knife mouthfuls of veggie pizza.

Ruiz grimaced at her uneaten pizza. "His wife left him back in 2009, taking a son and a daughter with her. We never could get the ex-wife to help us out, and she's moved to... Brazil, some place. She got uncontested full custody in exchange for an NDA, we're guessing, and a pile of money."

Lau put her fork down, eyes narrowing. I could see her working for compassion.

"God only knows why Grandma Serafina let him move back in. She already had a couple of great-grandkids in residence, and Michael had a pretty good career as a carpenter going." Ruiz pushed the paper plate away with the back of her fingertips, a slow headshake revealing her opinion of Grandma Serafina's custodianship.

I know I wasn't the only one that caught the significant lift of Falkner's chin.

As with Wisconsin's Ed Gein and Georgia's John Wayne Boyer, it's not uncommon for serial offenders--killers, rapists--who can't manage a romantic relationship with a woman to live with a female relative. It provides security, a pose of normalcy, and a sort of smoke screen. And for those who, due to their mental and emotional disturbances, are incapable of earning a livelihood, duping a nurturing woman into caring for them is the best available path to financial security.

We ascertained that Grandma Serafina was the same Serafina Bellamo whose disappearance we were investigating--and that body or no body, Ruiz was pretty certain we were looking at a murder. Bellamo,

she said, was the sort of elderly widow who sank deep roots and held her family close around her. She was in her nineties now--if she was still alive--and lived in the same house her husband had bought for her as a blushing bride of nineteen. She'd outlived two of her five children, and several of her grandchildren.

"Not the sort of old lady who just wanders off," Ruiz said, with the assurance of someone who has one or two like that in her own family.

"We'll want to go to the house," Falkner said. "What's its status?"

Ruiz informed us that it was being held as a potential crime scene. Two of Serafina Bellamo's great-granddaughters had still been in residence, one a divorcee with two kids of her own, but the Red Cross had arranged to put them up in a local Red Roof Inn for a couple of days. The great-granddaughters were Aimee Shays and Antonia Fisher[4], cousins rather than sisters. The great-great-grandkids were Shays' children David and Cindy Mehta, both under age five.

"The toddler did it," Agent Gates said, starting on her second pizza while Brady reached across her to liberate several slices. "I'll offer even odds."

"My money's on Michael Bellamo," Brady answered.

"He's dead," said Lau.

Villette answered, "Like that stopped anybody."

Ruiz laughed, and I think she began to relax. It must have seemed that the team were clowning for her. I knew they were carrying on an earnest conversation under her nose. "Do you want to go out to the house in the morning?"

I remember Falkner glancing at the last bite of crust in her hand and dropping it on a grease-stained paper plate. "Agent Lau, Agent Brady and I will go now. The rest of you finish and get set up here."

#

There's no mystery remaining regarding what they found, and it would be precious to pretend otherwise. Certain passages of Bellamo's journals were leaked, and quoted in the press--and other aspects were quoted and paraphrased at the trial. But *how* they found them is a story that deserves telling.

Agent Brady's knack for reading a scene is no more mysterious, really, than an experienced cook's ability to taste a sauce and understand what ingredients will supply the flavor notes it's missing. He's interviewed hundreds of serial killers and gammas; he has visited thousands of crime scenes. Long-term familiarity, in other words, translates to understanding. He may not be able to put in words exactly how he knows what he knows, but that's because it develops from uncounted associations carried out in his subconscious.

Agent Lau told me later that he walked through the house once, flipping light switches with a plastic glove, and slowly made his way to the bedrooms that had been inhabited by the Bellamos, Shays, Fisher, and the Mehta children. Serafina Bellamo had surrendered the master bedroom to Michael some years before, and taken up residence on the ground floor in deference to her advancing age. Shays and her children had the two larger of the remaining bedrooms and their connecting bath; Fisher, who was fourteen, had a smaller room in the finished attic--little more than a closet with a single window, wide enough for a student bed, a desk, and a chair. Storage was a trunk at the foot of the bed and two tiers of built-in drawers under it.

Michael Bellamo's bedroom had been searched by the police after his disappearance. They had found nothing suspicious then, although Ruiz mentioned that the investigating officers thought it extremely clean--"You could smell the Pine-Sol."

The downstairs bathroom--the one that would have been Serafina's--boasted a large, pink bathtub

bristling with grab bars for the safety of infirm persons climbing in and out. Brady found the concealed hatch that allowed access to the pipes serving it--and there, between the bottom of the tub and the basement's drop ceiling, was a large, square bundle wrapped in heavy duty lawn-and-leaf bags and black electrical tape.

Later fingerprint analysis confirmed it likely that it was Serafina who had hidden her grandson's murder journals there.

#

With some assistance from the rest of us, Agent Villette--the team graphologist--processed the journals while Falkner, Lau, and Tan began interviewing family members. Agent Gates was running down the personal details and identities of Michael Bellamo's victims as Villette found references to each one. Agent Brady and I sat across the table from Gates and Villette, compiling additional interview lists--at least until Villette stumbled across the passage that revealed what Michael Bellamo had done with the bodies of his later victims.

His jaw worked as he glanced up and found Ruiz, bent over a map while Brady explained to her the rudiments of how to run a geographical analysis. When she met his gaze, he asked, "Marina... does Hartford have some kind of an underground river?"

"Crap," Brady said. "You know there was a canoe in the Bellamo's back yard?"

#

A park and series of walkways run through meadows hugging the western bank of the Connecticut River. In the south part of the city, not far from Serafina Bellamo's home, those trails lie on reclaimed land nearly in the shadow of the Colt Armory, a historic firearms factory, which is a local landmark for its incongruous blue-and-gold onion dome.

Dawn found Marina Ruiz, myself, and the rest of the ACTF's away team wearing helmets and headlamps,

dragging rented kayaks to the boat launch at the water's edge. We paddled against the current under shading trees, a scatter of brilliant orange and red and blue crawling along the river bank until we reached the edge of an enormous pair of arched, hollow concrete rectangles--the outflow culvert of the buried Park River. Reflected light dappled the ceiling more than ten feet above, moving with the water, until the depths of the culvert vanished into darkness.

"River's low," Ruiz commented. "If you happen to notice the ceiling getting close... turn around and get out fast." She flipped her headlamp on with a touch, tugged her life vest down, and with a flourish of her paddle arrowed her kayak into the dank-smelling blackness. Agent Villette was right behind her, with Lau and Gates riding his wake. I was not surprised to learn that any of those three knew their way around a paddle: Gates grew up in Hawaii and Lau in California, and if there's an outdoor sport that Villette does not excel at, it's because he has not heard of it yet. Brady, Falkner, Tan, and I brought up the rear, paddling furiously and trying not to blind one another with our lamps.

What I hadn't been prepared for was the noise. The sound of the water, of our voices, of our paddles dipping and rising was caught, and amplified, and echoed. Reflection off the rippled, moving water gave sounds a shimmery quality, like the daylight we rapidly passed away from. I thought about how much it would hurt to fire a gun in here, and hoped everything we were about to discover was as cold and dead and piteous as Michael Bellamo's journals suggested.

Ahead, Gates hesitated. Villette tapped her kayak with his paddle. "Problem?"

"No internet down here," Gates replied. "Reminds me of the burrow."

I wondered what Ruiz made of that, but I could barely make out the words over the echoes. Maybe she hadn't heard them. Either way, she just kept

paddling.

Good advice for life.

The current wasn't bad; as long as we paddled steadily we made headway. Our lamps illuminated stained concrete walls and oily water. The Park River was a typical urban waterway, filthy and neglected. It had been buried in 1940 by the Army Corps, and from the smell of it I believed the Wikipedia article that said it sometimes carried sewage overflows.

We passed a bullfrog as big as my hand, swimming steadily downstream, and I resisted the urge to scoop it up into my kayak for a rescue. At least it was headed in the right direction.

Occasionally, we passed a gap in one of the side walls, and one of us would paddle over to examine it. They all proved empty except for trash and slime and black water.

We paddled for what seemed like a long time, through curving concrete vaults that amplified every sound. The walls fell away, replaced by a series of concrete pillars in a vast, vaulted chamber. I knew from my research that this was the confluence chamber, where the North and South branches of the Park River met.

Here there was a slope up to a deep pit--an overflow channel--and several barred gates. And a gravel bar with grooves in it: signs that other people had beached canoes and kayaks there.

It was obvious that the water was not deep enough past this point for the kayaks, and so we followed suit. Graffiti brightened the gray walls wherever our headlamps fell. This was obviously not such a remote destination.

Agent Brady kept his lip from curling, but only just. "You want me to walk into that water?"

Agent Gates made a gesture that would have tossed her braids back, once. "I'm the princess on this team. You get in your hip waders."

Princess or not, she was the first one into the water. It didn't reach over the tops of our hiking boots, a luxury for which we were all grateful as we slogged upstream, keeping to the left. The North channel was dangerous--a plant discharged boiling water into it at unpredictable intervals--and we were hoping to find Michael Bellamo's tragic cache on this side. If not, we'd backtrack and take our chances.

A sinuous gray shape writhed away us, slithering between stones. I thought it was a snake at first, but caught the outline of fins just as Gates murmured, "Mmm. Unagi. Who wants to fire up the hibachi?"

"Damn," Villette said. "I knew we forgot something."

Brady's ostentatious gagging noises echoed just as well as the splashing did.

#

We walked on gravel, or along the slanted concrete margins of the river, for only a few more hundred yards. It seemed like more in the pitch dark, with the uneven footing.

Agent Tan was the first to find the break in the wall. He called out, and we gathered around. A rusted steel door closed the gap, which was partially concealed behind falling water from an overhead inflow--storm drain or buried tributary.

We had pry bars, but as it turned out, they weren't necessary. Somebody else had broken the rusted hasp--long enough ago that all the bright surfaces had rusted again. Tan glanced over at Falkner--his light flashed across my eyes--but Brady was already moving forward.

When he bent his back and hauled the door and then the grate behind it open with a series of screeching noises not unlike what you might expect from a harpy in a leg-hold trap, we knew we'd found the right place before any of us shone our lamps inside.

The smell of decay is unmistakable.

#

The badly decomposed body of Michael Bellamo lay beside the fresher corpse of his grandmother, but they were not the most interesting things in the tomb. Once the crime scene techs had come down to process the (wet, miserable, horribly contaminated) scene, we realized that the Bellamos were not alone.

Under them were the bodies of twenty-seven girls between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, more or less lazily entombed in crumbling, hastily mixed concrete that had never cured particularly well in the dense humidity of the underworld.

#

"Great," Tan said. "So Michael Bellamo killed all the girls. I don't think Serafina killed Michael, and I am positive that a ninety-year-old woman didn't haul a two hundred pound corpse down the riverbank into a boat and paddle him out here, then wrestle him into that hole. And even if she did by some miracle accomplish that... who killed Serafina?"

"That's what we're here to find out," said Falkner, beginning to flip through the first of what would eventually be twenty-nine autopsy reports.

Thirty, once I ventured into the morgues--paper, not people--and recovered Celia Falcone's.

#

While I was up to my generative organs in file boxes, Falkner rejoined Lau, Brady, and Tan in continuing interviews with various members and collaterals of the Bellamo dynasty. Gates and Villette, the information specialists, had begun the enormous task of digesting the paperwork and computer documentation associated with the case, seeking out patterns and inconsistencies--and patterns in the inconsistencies. It was terrible scutwork, but they were more capable than the rest of the team put together.

When I dragged up the stairs, smeared in gray dust

and clutching a battered manila folder triumphantly to my chest, my burst of optimism quailed before the expressions of Gates and Villette. I placed the folder on the table before them and dropped into a chair.

The silence dragged for several moments. "Spill it," I said.

They shared a look. Then Villette pushed himself back from the table on derrick arms, the wheels of his chair skipping on the carpet protector.

"Drew Pennicuik[5]," he said.

I know I swore. Because I was pretty sure what the rest of that sentence was going to contain.

"Let me guess," I said. "Garrotted?"

"In his bed," Gates confirmed.

"The thing that eats *T. rexes* strikes again," said Villette. "I hate splitting the team."

I tried to find it in myself to feel grief, and couldn't. Pity was easier. I asked if they had informed Falkner yet and was informed that Lau and Brady were already enroute to Boston--a mere two hours or so by car from Hartford. I think I arose and busied myself with the coffee pot while saying something to the effect that it wasn't the first time we'd had to work two cases at once.

Villette's frown carved lines across his face that looked like the evidence of long-term pain. "Reyes thinks that might have been his doing, too."

"His?"

"The *Thing*."

"What, Vermont and Minnesota?[6] "

Villette shrugged. Villette's shrugs could be a stone-wall brushoff, or more eloquent than most people's soliloquys. This one was particularly ornate, using his attenuated frame to best advantage. It sparked a response drawn from all my

years of journalistic experience, though.

"The problem with conspiracy theories and *Mission: Impossible* plots is they assume the greatest truism of military history is incorrect."

"A plan never survives contact with the enemy?" Gates asked. "Or an army travels on its stomach?'"

I recollect that this pleased me enormously.

"So we're postulating a gamma that can--what, control other people's reactions?" I said. "He makes a move and he can make his target make the predetermined counter-move?"

Villette gave Gates a guilty glance, which I could read but did not understand. She did not seem to notice.

He said, "That's a possibility, but there are others."

I opened the Falcone file. "Your apex predator gives me the wiggins."

He snorted and said, "You and me both."

#

As soon as Martina Ruiz walked Antonia Fisher through the squad room and into Interview 2, my gut filled up with a horrible, sinking prescience I knew entirely too well. I happened to be standing next to Arthur Tan, watching him stir powdered creamer into a cup of oily coffee. We exchanged a glance, and he followed me into the observation room.

Fisher was a slender, forthright girl who wore body-concealing clothing and allowed her dark hair to fall long before her eyes. It's often easier for gammas to hide among the adolescent population--they tend toward skinny and ravenous under any circumstance. But when Marina left her in the interview room with a bag of Cheez-Its and a bottle of pop, the subject was remotely observed licking the inside of the foil snack package. Not indicative, certainly--but suggestive.

"Shit," Tan said, glancing at the file in his hand. "She's just turned seventeen."

Under Connecticut law, while Fisher was still a minor child, that meant that she was no longer considered a juvenile offender. And she was probably going to wind up a ward of the state, as her mother was nowhere to be found, her father unnamed on the birth certificate, and the great-grandmother who had been her legal guardian had been recovered from the sewers under Hartford.

"She's a minor," he said. "Is Shays still here? She needs an adult."

I thought the odds of Shays intervening on Fisher's behalf were slim, but people can surprise you. "I'll check. And if not... I'll get a social worker in."

As I was turning to leave the observation room, Tan cleared his throat. I looked back to find him staring fixedly at a point over my left shoulder. "Would you let Faulkner know I'd like the interview?"

"Sure," I said. "Any reason in particular?"

Tan turned back to the window. "She reminds me of my kid sister."

The door behind us cracked open, admitting a blade of light and Esther Falkner.

"Speak of the devil," I said.

She gave me one of her Mom Looks, subcategory *explain yourself*. I brought her up on the situation, and she replied that she'd see to it Shays was located, or brought back in if she'd gone home, as Falkner would prefer not to explain Fisher's potential gamma status to a social worker. "If the whole damned family has been keeping Michael's secrets all these years, I'd say she owes it to the kid."

#

While we were waiting for Faulkner to produce Shays, Villette let himself into the room, holding one of

Michael Bellamo's journals. He glanced through the window at Fisher and frowned. "Where's Mom?"

"Bending Shays to her will."

Villette said, "Good." He didn't look away from the subject in custody as he did.

On the other side of the one-way mirror, Fisher was demolishing the large pizza, extra cheese, that Tan had brought in to her as an initial rapport-building offering, and also out of compassion. We were all too intimately familiar with jammer metabolisms to take Fisher's likely caloric requirements lightly.

"She looks good for a gamma," Villette said.

Fisher was scraping the cheese off the cardboard disk with her fingernails.

It seemed like a good time to distract him, so I asked about the journal. Wordlessly, he held it open to a page he seemed to find by feel. Anybody else would have been holding it marked with a thumb; I suspected Villette had just remembered how far into the journal it lay, and opened it to exactly that page by observation.

In a mechanical voice, Villette read.

I won't reproduce Michael Bellamo's words here, but they were obviously about Fisher... and Bellamo was obviously the sort of offender who journaled his crimes for the pleasure of reliving them.

When Villette finished, he looked at me, and I looked at him.

"Good catch," I said eventually, because there was nothing else I could say. "Show that to Artful[7]."

#

When Falkner returned, she had a cowed Shays in tow, and news from Boston. Lau and Brady were in agreement that our mysterious vigilante shadow had struck again--and they were left with as few leads as ever. As we had a suspect in custody, Agent Gates switched her efforts to helping the Boston team

remotely, while Falkner and Villette rented a car and headed northeast.

Although Agent Gates joined me in the observation room with her laptop so Tan would have immediate access to both of us if he needed backup, Tan and I were left to handle the interview.

#

Special Agent Arthur Tan is a tall man, fit and broad-shouldered, with astonishing cheekbones. He can seem imposing, especially when he's wearing his Bureau-mandated armor of crisp seriousness. As a coworker, however, he demonstrates an easygoing playfulness that makes it simple to forget what an effective law enforcement officer he is. This time, in interviewing Fisher, he took that playfulness into the room with him.

The Reid Technique would have had two interviewers in the room with her, sitting in such a way that she could not face both of them at once. In dealing with a presumed juvenile gamma of unknown capabilities and a known traumatic past, Tan and I decided that it would be best to offer her a supportive environment.

This was an unusual case for us. Often, the manifestation leads us to the existence of the gamma in the first place. But this time we'd followed a pattern of mysteries to a locus, and as a result we did not know exactly what we were dealing with. We guessed her power did not involve doing injury to others, because by then we knew that both Michael and Serafina Bellamo had died from a series of blows to the head, the first of each delivered from the rear and most likely by surprise.

"She's probably one of the sneaky ones," had been Villette's opinion, before he left. I considered him uniquely qualified to speculate, and I judged it was probably the best for his own emotional well-being that Faulkner needed him in Boston.

When you deal with the sort of crimes that we do, the Bureau has learned that there needs to be no

shame in seeking support. While the sort of self-sufficient personalities that wind up in federal law enforcement can be difficult to convince, we are expected to need help, and we are expected to get it. There have been enough emotional and physical breakdowns as a result of exposure to the horrors the BAU and the ACTF deal with that very few people who work there retain the opinion that it's humanly possible just to tough it out--although, of course, we all tend to make exceptions for ourselves, and hold ourselves to unreasonable standards. That's human nature, and it's why we look out for each other.

We'd discussed the possibility that Michael Bellamo had been a gamma as well, that he'd seeded the victims of his abuse with the potential to convert. But there was no indication of the dietary or physiological markers of long-term gammahood, and while we were open to being proven wrong, we were operating under the assumption that Fisher had picked up her inoculation somewhere else, and that Bellamo had merely provided the break that led to full-blown flowering. It wasn't as if a child abandoned by both parents had a lack of opportunity for trauma.

People raised to abuse respond along a spectrum. Some lose the ability to form emotional bonds, or do so only with enormous difficulty. And for others, the boundaries so often trespassed do not reinforce: they collapse.

From the moment Tan walked into the interview room, re-introduced himself, and sat down, I suspected that Fisher was one of the latter. We had moved the table out to prevent Fisher from using it as a weapon if she became stressed during the interview. She had a plastic chair, and Tan had another. He sat down across from her and offered her a paper box of fried chicken--I remember that the smell was driving me crazy, and I could imagine how a jammer would feel--and I noticed that she made a clumsy, adolescent point of brushing his hand and arm with her fingers as she took it.

Although I observed his face closely for any sign that her special abilities might be carried by touch, he registered only mild surprise. Then he leaned back in his chair, making his body language as open and non-threatening as possible, and waited until she was done eating to begin asking questions. What she did not know, of course, was that the interview had commenced when he began building rapport--the instant he walked into the room.

8If Fisher were a little older, she might have invoked her Fifth Amendment rights immediately. But she was too inexperienced to have learned that the only decent strategy for dealing with the police is to invoke immediately, invoke often, and break that silence exactly long enough to lawyer up. So when Tan briefly folded his hands in front of his mouth before lowering them to say, "So we know your cousin Michael was a pretty bad man, Antonia," she responded.

"I guess."

"We found his diary. There's no guessing about it. He was horrible, and what he did to you and to your cousins was horrible."

"Well, he's gone now," Fisher said. "Whatever he did, it doesn't matter anymore, right? He took off."

We had not yet informed the family that we'd recovered his body, and I saw Fisher's eyes flicker to Tan's face as she judged his response to the narrative she was floating. Interviewing is a process of finding the narrative that the subject can accept. By this, we mean not the narrative of what happened, because (ideally, though the system is most definitely subject to abuses) the physical facts are no longer in dispute by the time the subject leaves the interview room, but the narrative of why it happened.

To obtain a confession, in other words, the interviewing officer must figure out what story the subject is telling him or herself about what happened, and use that to elicit a confession.

Tan said, "You know he wasn't just bad to his family, Antonia."

She shrugged and lowered her head. She'd set the empty box full of gnawed chicken bones beside her chair, and now she leaned over to pick it up again. Hiding her face with her hair, she ran her finger around the inside of the box repeatedly, and repeatedly licked it, harvesting any smear of grease or crumb of breading.

"I guess," she said.

"You do know he was worse to some other people. Your cousin Michael killed a lot of women, Antonia."

She shrugged. She dropped the box. A crumpled napkin fell out and she kicked it away with the side of her sneaker.

"I don't care about Michael. He's gone."

"And your great-grandmother? She's gone too?"

"Michael probably got rid of her." She pushed her hair behind her shoulder and smiled up at Tan through her lashes. I guessed she didn't know another way of interacting with a man, and I felt a wave of fury at Michael Bellamo mingled with despair that Fisher might never get a chance to learn other ways of relating. The staff at Idlewood are generally dedicated and conscientious, but Idlewood is not much future for a seventeen-year-old girl.

Tan said, "Antonia, we know that's not so."

He produced a file folder from inside his coat and opened it across his knees. There were autopsy photos inside--not the worst of them, but bad enough. I'd printed them, and they were enough to make you think you could smell something: Michael and Serafina Bellamo laid out on steel tables, awaiting the ministrations of one of our forensic colleagues.

Her attempt at flirtation dissolved as she turned her face away from the photos, lifting her chin in distaste, closing her eyes.

"We know when Michael died," Tan said. "We know when Serafina died. We know you killed them, and that you transported the bodies to Michael's dump site in the canoe. We've got a team doing forensics on the canoe right now, Antonia. Blood doesn't wash out. You can scrub it, you can pour bleach on it. We can still find traces, and tell who they came from[9].

"We know what he did to you, Antonia. We know what he did to your mother, and to all the other women. And we know Serafina covered up for him. It was self-defense. What you did was self-defense. We know that. We know how hard it was for you to control these desires you have to hurt people who deserve it. We know how hard you fought. We have ways to help you, if you let us. We know almost everything. *We know.*"

Tan looked at Fisher with total conviction, total commiseration. I couldn't tell if he was saying what he thought or offering a narrative. Come to think of it, I supposed it didn't have to be one or the other.

He held out a hand. She stared at it for seconds, and I thought at first he had pushed her too far, too fast. But she reached out and--wincing--took his hand.

This time, the expression of concerned surprise on his face was evident enough to be comical.

She said, "They needed to die."

"I believe you."

She sighed--relief--and sat back, releasing him. He rubbed his wrist absently. He said, "There's one thing I don't know."

She cocked her head, curious. They were on the same side now. She could do him a favor, reveal a secret.

"How did you know where he hid the bodies?"

Her smile turned to a thing of frost and barbed wire. "He showed me," she said. "So I'd know what would happen to me if I ever told anyone."

#

When Tan came out of the interview room, he shut the door behind him and leaned against it, as if to use his own weight as a barricade to keep Fisher--or more precisely, the awfulness that Fisher had endured--within. He closed his eyes. I saw his hands curl into fists, though he kept them down at his sides.

Then he opened his eyes again and straightened up with a sigh. "Got her," he said, without satisfaction.

Then, in a conversational tone--either shock, I guessed, or iron self-control--he asked, "You ever run up against one that couldn't touch you before?"

"Luke Eriksen," I answered. "Chicago. I'll pull you the paperwork."

He nodded, barely, his eyes focused past me. I felt like I had to explain. As if that would help. "Some manifestations show up a lot. Invisibility. Transmutation. Mind control. The details vary with mythology."

"It feels like there's a layer of oil all over her. Like you can't quite touch her, and if you closed your hand she'd squirt away like a watermelon seed."

"Damn," Gates said. She'd been so quiet behind her laptop that I'd almost forgotten she was there. Now she was looking up at both Tan and I with bright eyes. "She's a tough little girl."

I pointed to the notebooks. "She only killed the people who deserved it. She held out."

Gates nodded. I noticed the pinch of her cheeks and went to mix her a triple hot cocoa at the coffee station. I added a shot of cream before I handed it to her, but she just warmed her hands against the cup.

"Strength of character," I said. "Maybe she'll be a candidate for rehab, like Susannah." *Like you and Eddie Cieslewicz*, I thought but did not add.

I wondered how long it would be before other Idlewood inmates would join Cieslewicz and Gates in the pilot program.

Gates stared down at her keyboard. She held her hands in the air to either side of it like a freeze-framed orchestra conductor. She'd always had strategies for holding the rest of us at arm's length; the new one was a doozy.

She said, "Don't kid yourself, sweetie. It's not a cure. Every morning I wake up with Cruella DeVil in my head asking why it's wrong to want a puppyskin coat."

I should have shut up, like Tan did--but Tan's probably smarter than me. Instead I said, "But you tell her something."

Only then did she meet my eyes. "I tell her Chaz wouldn't like it. That's all. I have no idea what he tells his."

#

The Boston team did not uncover any significant leads in the hunt for our serial vigilante.

Stone Soup

Arlington, VA, Summer 2008

The landlord of the building didn't look typical--he was as skinny as Dyson, though older by twenty years, but his clothes were splattered with paint and plaster, and he didn't look askance at Dice's piercings. He'd introduced himself as Sam and led him up three flights of stairs to an open door.

"It was a weird bit left over. The other apartments are one or two bedrooms. Made it a studio. Don't mind the walls, I haven't painted in here yet."

"No, leave it, please," Dyson responded. "I like it. The last tenant did that?"

"Yeah. I get a lot of arty sorts in here, you know, and they change stuff."

"The walls're fine. It's good," Dyson said again.

The apartment was tiny. Smaller than even he expected, a tallish space smaller than a suburban garage. The mousy gray office carpet on the floor probably covered good hardwood--that he wasn't going to labor to expose, thanks--and the wall Sam had gestured at was a floating slab, installed to turn a tiny kitchenette into a galley kitchen. It ate a lot of the space for the sake of some cupboard and counter space, without a pass-through to make a breakfast bar.

But it was covered with the near-black of chalkboard paint from floor to ceiling, smooth, clean, and waiting to be expressed upon.

"I like it," Dyson said. "The deposit is same as a month's rent?"

The landlord laughed. "It's two hundred bucks. If you have it in cash--"

"I do," Dyson said.

"Well, I'll just write you a receipt. You wanna have a look in the junk room? Tenants, when they move out sometimes they have stuff they don't wanna take, and I lock it up in the junk room. Anything you can use in there, take it. Free."

"That would be good, thank you," Dyson said, and counted his money.

*

Ink & Steel had a nice sign, and when Dice walked in the first thing he smelled was cleaning products. That was promising. Another sign said, "Welcome to Ink & Steel, please use this gel," and a hand pump for sanitizer was right beneath it. Dyson rubbed it into his hands, getting between the fingers as he stepped to the right and into the reception area. An LCD screen ran a slideshow of freshly finished tattoos, each one dated and captioned with the name of the artist, and everything about the reception area was tidy and

easy to clean.

Except there was no one there.

"Hello?" he called out.

"Hi one sec I'll be right there."

It was hollered through at least one wall, and presently a tiny blonde walked in from the back, stripping off disposable gloves. "Hi! I was just doing some sterilizing. I'm Mary Lynn. Have you been here before?"

She was really cute.

"No, it's my first time--here. I just moved here, I'm from Chicago, sorry. My name's Dice."

"Hi, Dice. I see you've got some work already. Were you looking for a current idea?"

"Thought I'd look for a shop." She was...really cute. And she had dimples when she smiled. And she had a labret.

"Oh! Well I can show you around. I'm the shop's lead piercer but I do tattoos, and I can tell you about all our practices. I don't have an appointment for a half hour and I can't show you my piercing room because it's already clean and I don't want to open the door until I'm letting my client in. But I can show you everything else, if that's okay?"

"Uh, yeah. That'd be good, I'd like that."

"Great! Now do you have an allergy or a sensitivity to latex? I'd like to give you some gloves to wear so you don't have to worry too much about touching things..."

"Latex...is fine. Thanks." He sounded like an idiot. A total idiot. But Mary Lynn didn't seem to mind and she showed him around with a lot of pride, and was much less embarrassed than he was when she described how genital piercings would go (not that he'd asked, but) and she was really happy to book him an appointment for a tragus two hours later.

It was a good piercing--everything clean and safe, and Mary Lynn explaining the whole process as if he didn't have coming up on twenty pieces just in his face, and when the hollow needle pushed through he pressed his feet flat on the floor against the hot rush that bloomed across his head.

She asked him if he wanted to come with her to get coffee and cookies, because they'd gotten into one of those conversations that joyfully wandered all over the place, and by the time she had to go back they still weren't done so they arranged to meet the next day after Dice walked a few streets with

resumes in his hand.

*

Washington, DC

The Crank was a nice place; Dice could tell from the moment he stepped inside. Just a little bit seedy, enough to feel comfortable, and there were easily three dozen beers on tap at the long bar, finished not in the dark mahogany/walnut/rosewood so common to bars but a light, golden hardwood. There was a pennyfarthing in the rafters, and there was a billiard table, one of those tiny coin-operated models, but the felt was clean and unworn. It smelled like fresh wood, and the long, narrow space in front of the bar held a table that could seat twenty--more, if they cuddled up on the benches.

"I'm looking for Stewart," Dyson said to a man in the double-breasted coat and long white apron of kitchen staff.

"Sorry, he's not here. You're here for the bartender job?"

"Yeah," Dyson agreed, gesturing with his resume. The guy had an accent--as opposed to Chicago, of course, everyone did, but it was different from the different he'd been growing used to hearing here: the man's words followed a different rhythm, spoken further back in the mouth and allowed to resonate in the soft parts.

"Can you handle kegs?"

Dice grimaced. "Yeah, if I'm careful."

"Did you do ordering?" the man said, and Dice got it.

"Your accent. French?"

"Oui, Je suis Quebecois."

"Whoa, I didn't take French in school," Dice said, and the man smiled back. "Ordering was...I didn't do the order, I just wrote what we needed."

"So you might as well have. I'm Dennis."

"Dice--Dyson."

"Dice. What do you want to order?"

"Just looking at the wall. That's a lot of gin up there for not-a-martini-bar. Somebody on the staff likes it?"

"Yeah, the boss."

"G & T?"

"That's the one."

"So obviously the boss's expertise on gin should be a thing, since he likes it."

"Yeah. That's a really good idea. How are you with beer?"

"Beer's the lifeblood of a bar. I don't know the local stuff yet but that won't take long."

"You good with the late nights?"

"Been doing six to two for years."

"You ride a bicycle?"

"What?"

"Oh, well, it'll give people something to talk to you about. Can you come in on Monday? It'll be slow but Debbie doesn't have classes so she can show you everything."

*

Dice had thought it a weird question but he soon found out that the Crank was popular with bicycle couriers, messengers, and line-standers. The boss originally worked as a messenger while attending night school, and the unspoken preferred customers were bicyclists--the few messengers left, mechanics, and those who made cycling an expression of style. Their presence added atmosphere for the suits who liked to think their jobs hadn't stolen the person they were at twenty-one, who gathered to eat the Crank's simple, inventive pub fare at lunch and swirl the gin happy hour specials.

But by the time Dice came in most of them were on their way out, leaving the long common table as the domain of the regulars who pooled their money to buy pitchers of beer and rehash stories of bike polo or group rides.

He got to talk to them on slow nights. They noticed things, like a new piercing (there was a week-long discussion after his first snakebite, over the virtues of pairing it up or going for symmetry) the touch-up he'd gotten on his dragon, or progress with physio on his left hand. He knew who was into Zen Buddhism (Lesley and Richard), who was vegetarian (same, plus Andy and Simon), which degrees were on hold for a while (Psychology, Engineering, English Lit., Microbiology, another Psychology, Linguistics, and Political Science), and where the elaborately knitted beanies they wore in winter came from (Tyler, avid knitter and one of the Psychology-on-hold students, a line-stander who was rarely in late because of the insanely early hours).

It didn't take long for the regulars to start asking him what he was up to, to expect that he'd take a minute to sit down with them before he went on shift,

or, after he switched to opening so Debbie could take a semester of courses and still keep her job, to sit down after work so they could get on him about when he was going to start biking to work.

*

It was about a year later, on a spring day of the blustery sort when Andy said, "You know, I have a Surly Cross-Check frame, never felt like I could get the geometry right. It's just a bit too small. But I bet it'd fit you."

Dice stopped for a moment, then realized...Andy was talking to him. "Oh, yeah? I'd worry about it getting stolen though, locked up to a sign or whatever."

"I have a wall rack," Tyler said. "I got a bunch of them put together. You can hang it up in your apartment."

"Wait, are we building Dice a bike?" Simon asked. "I've got those drop handlebars, he can use 'em, Lesley was going to rebuild some wheels--"

"Hang on," Tyler said, and fished a pen out of his bag. "Frame, check, you got a fork too?"

"Yeah."

"Frame, fork, handlebars, wheels, I can get a bottom bracket pretty cheap, new chain, I've still got like, ten boxes of tubes from that vulture sale--"

"Find out if Richard still has those bits he said he was going to get rid of," Andy said, but he already had his phone out. Dice stared at them all.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you a bike," Tyler said. "You need to buy a lock. And lights. Call it two hundred bucks for a really good lock and really good lights, and a decent saddle."

"I've got a saddle," Simon said, "but it's probably not something I'd give to a friend without warning that the fucking thing is hell in a bucket."

Dice just...he should say something. "This is crazy."

"It's extra parts we have sitting around," Tyler said. "You're on the hook for the lock and the lights."

Then Lesley walked in and asked, "What's this about wheels?" and slid onto the bench, pouring beer for herself out of the pitcher while they went down a list of parts and Dice got Dennis to come out and watch the bar while he pretended to have a second look at keg lines but really just needed to get a grip on himself.

They had it made in three days. It was a shade of brown that Andy had said was called Beef Gravy. It had pull brakes and only one gear and they'd set it so you could coast, but started extolling the benefits of going to fixed as soon as he'd gotten used to it. Dice took it for a wobbly circle to their cheers and applause and privately vowed to get a different saddle immediately.

When he hopped off, supremely conscious of the nose of the bike's saddle, he named it Stone Soup.

There is a playlist for these scenes and "Single Bullet Theory" at Grooveshark.

4.08 "Single Bullet Theory" - by Chelsea Polk

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Part 1

Act I

Washington, D.C., October 2012

That bit about bartenders being confessors is true, so Dice usually kept an eye on that one stool when a new person came in. But he didn't expect Tyler to ignore his favorite seat by the window to sit up at the bar.

"Gin fizz, short."

"Straight up or twist of the week?"

Tyler stabbed a Guinness coaster with one finger and made it spin. "What's the twist of the week?"

"Blackberry sage simple syrup and the usual lime."

"Oh hell, I'll try it."

Tyler should have laughed, or smiled. Instead he took out knitting needles and a solid-looking mass of a sweater, bumpy and winding with crossed cables. He nodded once without looking up at the soft *tock!* of the glass landing on the wood bar and left the drink untouched to examine his knitting against a paper chart folded and covered in neon highlighter pen lines, apparently absorbed in finding his place.

But he had taken The Chair. "That's the same sweater you were working on last week, yeah?"

"Yeah. Pretty much have the pattern down."

There were dishes to move out of the washer from the lunch hour and plenty of slicing to do...conveniently near The Chair. So Dice brought a tray of stemmed glasses over, and a fresh basket of lemons and limes to slice for Happy Hour, when the first of the after work crowd would be coming in.

"Complicated stuff like that. I couldn't do it."

Tyler kept his eyes on his work. "Day shift still killing you?"

"Nah," Dice said. "Taking that melatonin stuff, it works decent. Still don't want your day job, though."

That was it. Tyler was here too late. He ought to have been in at lunch hour, ready to go home after a shift of waiting in line for a lobbyist. And he still hadn't touched his drink.

He could be focused on the complex pattern of knitting, but-- Oh, what the hell. "Okay, Tyler. Something shitty happened."

Tyler finally looked at Dice, full-faced, but not surprised. "How'd you know."

Dice shifted backwards to give Tyler a little space, turned to break eye contact. It's never a confrontation. "Bar's dead, your favorite seat is empty, sky's got good light. But you're sitting in the Problem Chair."

"It's got a name."

"And a function," Dice confirmed. "You sit there, you're in the one place where no one is nearby except the bartender. So it's the right place to sit if you want--"

"Confession," Tyler finished, and that got a laugh from him. "All right, how do I start? Not "Bless me, Father," I imagine."

"If this place was like a book I read once, you'd huck the glass into the fireplace after, but you can start by making a toast." It's just a deft movement to turn over a short glass for himself, to press the soda button on the hose, the light bubbles sliding over a slice of lime. A few seconds, to let him think about it.

"A toast," Tyler muttered, and he raised the short glass, offered Dice a smile full of nails. "Here's to double jeopardy, then."

"Double jeopardy," Dice echoed, and he gulped down a swallow of club soda and lime. "Tyler, I hope you don't mind me saying this, but that's a fuck of a toast. Care to talk about it?"

It took an extra moment for Tyler to swallow, and nod. "Yeah. I do. You need to polish glasses or something?"

"Tradition demands it," Dice said. "Soon as I'm done with this." "This" was the limes and lemons, half-done with slicing and freshening. Something to watch, besides Tyler's face or the perfectly imperfect haircut.

"It's okay? I don't want to dump all my problems on you. Besides, it's weird."

"Weird *and* double jeopardy? Give it."

But Tyler changed the subject. "I saw Stone Soup out there. You got him fixed?"

"Stone Soup is great, the new crank is ping and click free, the ratio's easier on my knees, too."

"How's your track stand?"

"My sides are sore."

"Fuck you, get harder," Tyler said, and they shared a laugh in the moment before he untangled his fingers from the yarn and picked up the gin fizz. "This is good, you know."

"Thanks. We'll probably sell out of it tonight. Dennis hopes so, anyway."

Tyler nodded, and gazed at the purpling red drink. "It's really weird. Crazy, even."

"Try me." Dice went back to slicing citrus. No eye contact. It's not a confrontation.

"Okay. I watched a girl I used to know get away with murder. I know she did. I just don't know how. It's crazy."

"Reasonable doubt?"

"Yes. But I know her. She did it."

Dice swiped his knife with a clean wet rag, and busied himself with drying it. "So you know that she's capable of murder. That's a bit spooky, you know. One sec. I'm going to make sure we've got some time."

"Okay."

Dyson went down the long bar, upending short glasses with sliced and quartered lemons and limes into a tub, stacking the dirty glasses, replacing them with fresh, and left the tub of discards next to the manual juicer in the obsessively white and steel kitchen. "Dennis."

Dennis looked up from the stock pot and turned down the music--a wall of guitar worthy of My Bloody Valentine, and a man singing about continuous thunder. "Sup."

"Got a customer in the chair. Is it all right if I stick to him a bit?"

"Sure. I can juice those for you, I'm doing fuck all."

"Thanks."

"You check the taps?"

"Yeah. Debbie gonna be late?"

"Yeah. Problem?"

"Never. I'll log her in on time."

Dennis nodded at Dice, and his grateful smile wrote his relief. "Thanks."

Dice took his bus tub off the counter, ran the old cups down the conveyor washer and headed back. "Sorry. But I've got a little time now. I still say that knowing someone you believe capable of murder is spooky."

"It is. It's fucked. I had to go see it. Even though I--just had this feeling that it wasn't going to go right. But I have to go way back to explain."

Dice raised a fresh polishing cloth. "Go for it."

"Okay," Tyler said, and wound the yarn around his fingers again, needles moving with soft clicks. "Met her in school. My psych degree, undergrad. And I was a nerd, right."

"You?"

"Me," Tyler said with a little grin. "Gingers have no soul, all that. Too smart, bike riding wasn't really athletic, it was how losers with no cars got around."

"You're *still* a loser with no car," Dice said.

"You don't get to talk until you can track for a full light and not bitch about it."

"Okay, okay, you were a nerd. Magic the Gathering or D&D?"

"Magic. Shit, I still have my cards, don't tell anyone. I joined the gaming club. And she was that girl. The pretty one who loved to play Magic the Gathering and was in a LARP troupe. That girl. Big groups tend to have one, you know, and they get a lot of shit."

"Pretty fish in a nerdy pond."

"Yeah. Except she needed to be the pretty one. The attention, that fairest of them all crap, and it didn't help that she really was beautiful. But she wasn't one to cross. At all. And those who crossed her...had bad fates. That were never her fault."

"Anybody die?"

Dice waited while Tyler did something to twist a bunch of stitches around each other, then stuck the short, grooved needle behind his ear. "No. But

people got sick. Or overdosed, there was that one girl... That was awful. She left school after."

"Christ, do you mean what I think you mean?"

Tyler nodded and then raised his knitting to pull out a few stitches. Busy. Can't look up. "She was at a party. Somebody found her in one of the back bedrooms, and she was damn near dead from booze, blouse torn. It was all over school. Not a single guy got a moment's discipline, she dropped out. I have no idea what happened to her."

"And you are saying that Beautiful Gamer Girl was responsible, but you don't know how she did it."

"She was at that party too, I heard that. But nobody died. No wait, that's not true."

"Somebody died?"

"Her father," Tyler said, and set his knitting down to drain the glass. "Another?"

"Sure," Dice said, and stepped a little ways off to mix it. "What happened there?"

"Diet pills."

"He was concerned with his weight?"

Tyler cocked his head and said, "Isn't everyone? Probably he got hooked. They're stimulants. If they were magic weight-loss pills I'd guess that's how she'd do it. Never met a woman who was that uncaring about carbs, fat, anything."

"So none of that dressingless salad and half an apple thing."

"No way. She could demolish an entire pizza on her own and go looking for ice cream, never gain a pound. BMI of 18, but lanky is in."

"How old was she?"

"Just before college. And she became a trustifarian who played Munchkin."

"No mother?"

Tyler shook his head. "No. Lung cancer. Apparently when they found out she was way too gone, less than six months to live, all that. I think the girl I'm talking about was... fifteen? I think."

"So she was in pretty tight with your group."

"You could say that," Tyler said wryly. "She was my girlfriend."

"Oh. Damn."

Tyler gave Dice a half-mouthed smile and raised his glass. "Haven't had another girlfriend since, actually."

"That bad, huh?"

"Aw, it was fucked up. I mean that I liked her a lot and she liked me, too, but we never called it that and it was deeply complicated and then it was over. Which is glossing a lot of shit over, because of brevity and all that."

"Okay."

"It's pathetic anyway."

"Probably not, actually. You said it yourself--she was really beautiful. And she liked things that you liked, too, and you were, what, eighteen? Freshman year?"

"That's right."

"We're all kinda dumb at eighteen, Tyler. Especially about sex. Especially about love. I could tell you stories, too, only they wouldn't include winning the--"

Dice fumbled a glass, caught it, and made a small noise of irritation. *Careful.* "Winning the lady's favor. So you loved and lost. It's on the list of Everybody Goes Through It at least once, you know?"

"You're right."

"Damn right. This stuff happen after you split?"

"Actually, it was before. I kick myself. I knew she was trouble, but she was overwhelming. In a way. Something about her. And if you were alone with her, she had a way of making it like you were the only people in the world. It's like she--"

Tyler faltered, biting back what Dice heard in the silence. "Cast a spell?"

"That was exactly what I was going to say. It was like she cast a spell. And the next thing I know, I'm doing shit to impress her, and I couldn't wait to see her again."

"So you had it bad."

"So bad. I even convinced myself that my initial distrust was just misplaced, intimidated attraction to the prettiest girl I ever saw with a holy forest deck."

"But the spell broke. What happened?"

Tyler shook his head. "Nothing. I mean, it isn't like I caught her doing something that made the scales fall from my eyes."

"But gradually..."

Another pause, as Tyler used his short grooved needle to move loops around and knit them crossed over each other. Dice put polished glasses up on the hanging brass racks, coming back when Tyler was through the tricky part.

"I was doing some work with a group of psychology majors who wanted to make a group specifically for high knowledge of the man behind the curtain--how psychologists interview and direct conversations, the therapeutic attitude, and the like--but who were depressed or anxious or just, whatever." Another smile. "You don't do too badly at it yourself. Ever thought of doing psychology?"

"No way could I afford it. But it sounds like your group helped."

"Yeah. It helped. But I think it only happened because she was gone. And pretty soon people started pointing out that the way I talked about her was fucked up, and I spent a lot of time marvelling over how stupid--no. How out of character that year was."

"More than just being eighteen?"

"Yeah, a lot more. I thought I put it behind me, and then I saw her in the paper, and it all came back. After all those years."

Dice used rolling his neck to hide forcing his shoulders down, and waved at the trio of suits who walked in. "Can't feel good."

Tyler caught the wave, and gave Dice another of those half smiles. "I guess I dumped it all on you anyway."

"Don't worry about it. Sometimes you gotta tell someone. But Tyler--"

"Yeah?"

"You want to talk about it again, feel free."

"Thanks, Dice. I appreciate it."

Dyson nodded and turned back to the first three customers of the happy hour rush. By the time he was done, Tyler was already headed out the door, a nice tip tucked under the coaster.

Happy Hour was that slice of time where the suits came in and commingled with the people who delivered their briefs and court orders and motions, but only just. When Dice first started at The Crank he'd never see the long table flanked by benches that dominated the front of the bar as anything but the territory of the couriers who chipped in for shared pitchers and rehashing last night's polo match. But the switch to day shift meant he saw the odd moments where lawyers and aides sat with couriers, messengers, and line-standers, affably talking and even occasionally chipping in for a pitcher. He'd made the switch to help Debbie go back to college and finish her degree. He worked late on Tuesday so she could attend an important class.

"I logged you in and I did a bunch of your counting and orders already," Dice said to Debbie, and got his feet under him in time for her hug.

"Yooooou are awesome, is what you are, and I'll do it for you on Thursday. Eighty eight minutes more beauty sleep."

"I'll need years," Dice said, and pretended to wince when she punched his shoulder. "Ow! Hey!"

"That didn't hurt, you big faker. Are you hanging around?"

"No, I gotta clean my apartment," Dice said, and that was all the excuse he needed, at least until he tried to walk past the big table, now filled. He got away with only a little ribbing about not coming to play polo (again) and a few invitations to sit down and have a beer before he was rolling Stone Soup onto the street, and he was at speed in time to catch the light, ducking down less busy streets, standing up for the one climb he had before he was poised at the last intersection before his building, wobbling back and forth on fixed pedals while the light took its sweet time changing.

Isabella's boyfriend was coming out as he was coming in, and he held the door so Dice could just put the bike on his shoulder and hit the stairs, up three flights to his apartment. Somebody was cooking spaghetti, by the smell, and somebody else was listening to the television on top volume, and the hallway light was replaced, but Dice didn't waste any time getting in and closing the door behind him, or of putting his bike on the wall and out of the way. His laptop was still on the counter where he'd left it that morning, and he swiped his fingers over the trackpad to wake it up.

It was a moment to check "Acquitted murder D.C." and find the day's news reporting the complete collapse of the prosecution's charges against Kylie Tennant and Natalie Summers-Barrington for murder and conspiracy to commit murder. A photograph showed Kylie and Natalie leaving the courtroom, and Dice studied it.

Natalie had to be the one, judging from the photographs. She looked bird-

boned even dressed for the cool weather, startlingly vivid red hair spread over the shoulders of a soft gray coat, the collar cosied up around a scarf in that blue-green color that seemed made for fair-skinned redheads. She had one glove on, and the hand that reached out to Kylie was slender and long. Kylie had been captured in a moment where she looked at the crowd of reporters with fear, groping blindly for Natalie's hand.

Dice had a dozen different tabs up in a few moments, ritually saving each one to his bookmarks and to Evernote. Websites disappeared all the time, after all. He stopped to read about the trial, and had the creepy feeling that it was straight out of a Law and Order episode: The prosecution argued that Natalie had paid Kylie to poison Sheldon Barrington with martinis that were actually mixed with 95% grain alcohol instead of the usual 40% vodka, which caused the alcohol poisoning which led to his death while he attended a "Spring Break" party promoting Kylie's new nightclub. Natalie hadn't attended, but she had called 911 the next morning. An ambulance had come but Sheldon had been dead for at least an hour.

The defense had neatly overturned every assertion the prosecution had by countering that they had no actual physical evidence, that the sizeable sum Kylie had supposedly been paid to deliver the drinks doctored with 191 proof grain alcohol was actually a selfless gift to a friend, and how the prosecution couldn't find any evidence that 191 proof grain alcohol was even present at the party where Sheldon Barrington had consumed three vodka martinis. And the real bombshell came when news media were sent a video of Kylie dressed in a neon orange string bikini dancing while mixing shaken martinis for three partygoers--Sheldon and two of his friends--from the same bottle of vodka, and secured their declarations that they had drunk the same martinis as their friend, and didn't suffer the same alcohol poisoning.

But it was weird, just as Tyler had said. And impossible.

Dice got up and erased the Wall. Maybe it was just the fury of a man scorned, but if it wasn't, it was a hell of a puzzle, and it wouldn't fit anywhere else. He wrote the map of what he knew, the map of the unanswered questions, switching colors depending on fact or speculation. Maybe it was nothing.

Maybe.

*

Dice got through Wednesday, and that was the important part. He'd talked to Eddie about the things that Eddie liked, did his duty as his brother, and got out of Idlewood and drove. Back into the city and into his parking space and back onto Stone Soup and rode the long way around to home, pedaling like he had something to run from. Well, he did. He danced Infernal closed and slept like a stone, but woke up too early and used his extra eighty eight minutes

Thursday morning to run a load of laundry while he stood in front of the Wall with his laptop crooked into his right elbow, going between writing more on the Wall and dragging up more searches on Natalie Summers, and the wealth of information gave him a sinking feeling. She was a celebutante, curse that ugly word, and that meant lawyers ready to chase down so much as a syllable of libel.

Money, money, money. It was all over the place. And power, most probably. He'd had ten notes and questions down on the board before he had to jump into BDU's still warm from the dryer, bending over to roll up the right leg and shove his feet into socks. He tucked his laptop along while he poured out some cereal and milk, paging through results in images and reminding himself to not to get ahead of himself for the sake of a good story. Then it was time to go, so all he wrote on the Wall was "Crawl around looking for Weird Shit stories involving an N" before he careened out the door with Stone Soup on his shoulder, the u-lock tucked through his belt.

He was getting pretty good at the impatient shuffling dance that was standing still on a fixed gear with both feet on the pedals, ready to push back up to speed and make the light timing. He wasn't as daring as a messenger would be in taking the intersection as his own, but he could make the six mile ride to the Crank in good time. The rack was mostly empty, but Tyler's bike was there, and Dice locked up next to it and went in.

He was sitting in The Chair again, and back to his usual ginger ale--that was good, right? And he nodded at Dice, knitting still in hand--it was still kind of a lumpy mass but it was bigger than it had been. He had a menu and a roll-up, so he was parked for lunch.

Interesting.

Dice stowed his bag, washed his hands, and started getting glasses and mugs put away for the lunch rush. Debbie had already done a lot of the work, and for that he gave her a hug that lifted her off the ground and yelled *ow!* when she punched his shoulder, stumbling around like she'd decked him. She had brothers, growing up. She treated him like one. He liked how Debbie treated brothers.

The coffee was fresh and he made himself a cup to sip while the first of the lunch crowd came in. He could set his clock on his regular lunch-at-the-bar patron, who always ordered a glass of Guinness to go with whatever Dennis had put in the slow cooker that day, so he was setting it down at her favored seat just as she took off her gloves and coat. He kept an eye on Tyler's glass, but he didn't have time for much beyond a hello as he dove straight into pouring beers, dashing out the occasional tray of orders, and keeping the bar tidy.

Tyler stayed right where he was through it all, knitting with headphones in, lifting it to show a curious woman who'd been in for lunch, patiently waiting out the midday crowd. He'd ordered a Port City IPA and made it last through Dice's grinding through the backed up glassware and changing tills with short reports, waiting tables while Rachel reckoned up balances for the deposit and the running tip count.

So when Dice finally set down a huge bunch of thyme stalks to prep for drink garnishes, he'd literally been waiting hours.

"You basically go non-stop for lunch, don't you?"

"Yeah, it's fast-paced. Sorry about making you wait." It was simple work--strip off the smaller leaves, leave the tips as is, and the smell was nice.

"Oh, no, I got a lot of this sweater done, no worries. I just wanted to, you know, sorry for telling you the crazy story yesterday."

"Don't worry about it. Think if I possibly knew a...serious criminal, I'd have a hard time keeping it in." Some things you just had to tell someone, if only to know that you weren't alone.

Tyler nodded, but he didn't look convinced. "It's kind of far-fetched, though."

Maybe to somebody else, but Dice wasn't sure Tyler was ready to hear his theories. Hell, he didn't even know if they were true or not. "Look, you're not far off from being an actual psychologist, right? Who'd know better than you?"

Tyler smiled and looked down at his beer before looking back at Dice. "That's nice to say. Truth is, looking back I really feel like an idiot. I was taking a degree in examining people and personality, and look what happened to me."

"First year, though."

"Yeah, you're right, freshman year."

"What did Beautiful Gamer Girl take?"

"She was in science."

"So were you."

"Egghead science. Chemistry courses mostly, some Biology, not really committed to a program but she was a geek."

"Okay, so. Here?"

"Here. Georgetown."

"A fine Jesuit school," Dice said soberly, and that made Tyler laugh.

"And me a good Catholic. Well, not actually, but grew up in the culture."

"Yeah, me, too."

Tyler gave him a smile that said I know. "And I didn't want to be a priest, but I did want to help people, so psychology."

"Think about going back?"

Tyler nodded, slowly. "Could do graduate work at American. I have thought about it. I am paying the shit out of my student loans and I have my degree...and I'm standing in line for a living, but it gives me time. I read, I stay on top of things. Honestly, I'm hoping to start next year."

"I think you can do it," Dice said.

"Thanks," Tyler said, and then grinned at him. "You know, you've still got a bit of eyeliner on from clubbing last night."

Dice went for a bar cloth and had his glasses off in a swipe. "Oh tell me now, after I've been wandering around like that for hours!"

"It doesn't look bad," Tyler says. "It goes, actually. With all the piercings and the VNV Nation t-shirt."

That made him stop and check if Tyler was joking. "Yeah? Okay," Dice said, and got his glasses back on. "So was Beautiful Gamer Girl good at school?"

"What?" Tyler blinked, and then his brow smoothed out as he nodded. "Oh yeah, sure. She did good work, and she knew a lot. She could write down molecular structures from memory, explain what the parts were. She did it with drugs. Caffeine, THC, alcohol, stuff like that."

"You mean those diagram things with Os and Ns and stuff."

"Yeah. She even wrote down some neurotransmitters once, helping me with some material specifically about the chemical brain, and those are some monsters."

"Heard a bit about that. If you're stressed your brain makes cortisol, serotonin does something with mood, you know, stuff here and there."

"Oh yeah," Tyler agreed. "It's hard to talk about because it gets a bit scary for people to think that everything they feel, think, and believe is just the product of chemicals."

Dice stopped stripping leaves for a moment. "Wait, is that true?"

"Strictly speaking or my opinion?"

"Whichever."

"My opinion is that nihilists are boring," Tyler said, and finished his beer in three swallows. "There's enough evidence to put me on the side that the concept of free will doesn't exist the way people understand it, but that it's way more complicated than that."

Dice held the last thyme sprig in his hand and scraped a little round leaf off his thumb and into the bowl. "So...don't give up hope?"

"And that choices do matter. And self-awareness gives you power-- Aw, I'm going on, you should stop me when I do that."

"No," Dice said, and lifted one finger to signal for him to wait while he dashed the thyme up to the kitchen, returning with lemons and limes. "It's interesting. A lot of people don't think about stuff like this, so I don't know if I could really, you know, give much of my own opinion."

"Everybody's got one, though," Tyler said. "Where do you stand on free will?"

"You want another one of those beers, or are you on your way out?"

"I ought to get going," Tyler said. "But you didn't answer my question."

He offered Dice the empty beer glass, and Dice set the paring knife down to take it. "I think--"

How did he explain this? He thought of Eddie, of himself. How *It* had skipped the first born and took hold in the younger son. Could he tell Tyler about that?

He wanted to.

But not today.

"People do what they do because that's what they know how to do, and it's hard to choose a different way. But you can still choose. Even if it's not easy." He realized he'd been running one finger around the lip of the glass, stopped, and shrugged. "Even if you fuck it up most of the time. Even if you keep sliding back into what you know, you can still get wise to it and head back towards what you choose."

Tyler eyed him for a moment. "So you also think nihilists are boring."

"The angry bits set to 120 BPM aren't so bad."

Act III
Arlington, Virginia

Dice had to take the long way home because of Secret Service in the way, but made it there as fast as he could pedal, running his hard cranking playlist with the volume blasting off his handlebar speaker, turning heads with the

heartbeat rhythms and industrial machine sounds that built into a glitchy, scratchy...Charleston, just to make things really weird.

Dice had seen cyclists taking a lane in the traffic around the Lincoln Memorial, but he was fine with not being quite that cool, and opted to jump off the bike and make like a pedestrian to get across the parkway. He touched the base of Aspiration and Literature as he waited on evening traffic to let him cross over to Music and Harvest, and he crossed the Arlington Memorial Bridge, pedalling hard to put Sacrifice and Valor behind him. He took the pathway along the Virginia side of the Potomac murmuring *follow the evidence, don't invent connections* like a mantra.

But he fucking had to get home and check out the science angle. He'd steered the conversation away from that neatly enough, but it had sunk tiny hooks in his thoughts, never that far from his mind for the rest of the shift, but he had to get to his laptop so he could check it out on his anonymized system. He could feel sweat starting up on his back under his messenger bag, and muttered a *fuck you, get harder* for that discomfort. He waited for a light next to a Camry with a nursery-school aged girl in the passenger seat watching him inch the bike back and forth on the pedals to keep his balance. When she stared up at him he smiled, and she waved at him, patting the window glass.

Then it was time to sprint and catch the next light before it changed and then crank back, skidding the Cross-Check to stop in front of the market. He grabbed a pack of 5 A.M. Saint, a frozen pizza, and two golden-red apples, paying in cash, and then he was lugging the weight of the glass the last two blocks to his apartment, vowing to get a front wheel rack even if it made locking his bike a sovereign pain in the ass.

"I've got beer, wide load," he called, hearing someone on the landing as he wrestled his way into the vestibule.

"These are toll stairs, you need to pay me beer tax," Bella answered.

"A likely tale." But he set his bike down and got one to give to her anyway.

When Isabella emerged on the first landing, she had a laundry basket on her hip, barefooted, in a pair of skintight pvc pants and an ancient Washington Capitals t-shirt big enough for four of her.

"Let me guess. Laundry day."

She accepted the beer and swaddled the cap in her t-shirt hem to open it. "You gonna need the laundry tonight?"

"Did it this morning."

"You got up in the morning?"

"I know, Ragnarok's coming."

"I'm gonna be doing laundry all night," Bella groused. "Mister no job couldn't figure out the washing machine and take care of things while he's sitting around playing Guild Wars two or whatever the hell it is, so this is my night off."

"I feel like I should give you two beers," Dice said.

"Nothing fucking doing, he'd take it for himself. Thanks, by the way." and she was headed down the stairs to the laundry room.

He said, "Good-night, Bella," and went up, listening to the creaking of the wood beneath the ancient, threadbare carpet on the landings, and that one spot that squeaked just by his door. Once inside, he opened one bottle, put the other four in the fridge, and had the pizza stuffed in the pre-heating oven. "Set the timer this time," he muttered to himself, and wound around to the Wall, and oh boy, his fingers itched to get the words "Chemistry Biology knowledge of chemical structures," listing the ones Tyler had mentioned. Caffeine. Alcohol. THC. And then Neurotransmitters?

Another chalk, orange, and Dice wrote, "needs attention," and then "who's giving it now?" and connected it to Sheldon Barrington's name. If she had killed her husband, what reason would she have? Gossip news, maybe, but Dice settled in front of the counter he used as a standing/barstool-height desk and opened up TOR-protected browsers, searching her name in Google, opening new tabs for images and news, and started scrolling down the page full of pictures. The first ones were mostly of her at the trial, elegant, reserved, especially next to the glass face of her friend and co-defendant, who often looked like she was trying to figure out who to pray to so she could end this when she wasn't staring at Natalie.

He scrolled until the images started to turn up results that weren't mostly of her, and switched tabs to read news articles, most of it around the trial, hoping that in the midst of the sensation somebody might have spent some time telling a story of her life--it wasn't far-fetched. People enshrined murderers all the time. A beautiful wealthy woman accused of murdering her young, handsome, wealthy husband? Somebody would have wanted to examine her life beyond shocking photos and secret hotel romp tabloid stories.

It didn't take long to find a story focused on the relationship between Natalie and Kylie, but the tone was ambivalent. Sometimes the implication was that Natalie was the dominant partner and Kylie was a grateful follower. But the writer balanced that scurrility by wondering how they managed to plan the murder of Natalie's husband without leaving any evidence of their communication. Nothing, in an era long past shock over taped telephone calls or the terrifying wealth of personal data held in an individual's Gmail account.

The story talked a bit about Natalie growing up as the only child of a wealthy captain of the melding between marketing, food, and science that produced nutraceuticals--Dice let out a *Huh!* as he recognized the brand that manufactured his melatonin capsules.

"Worlds colliding!" Dice cried aloud, and jumped up at the insistent buzz of the kitchen timer. He would have burned dinner for sure. He shut the laptop and set it on the wall rack where it lived, out of the way. No greasy pizza fingers on his keyboard.

And no greasy pizza fingers on his Wall, either, but paper would do fine. He doodled and scribbled with his left hand--he'd never get praise for penmanship, but he did it left-handed just because he *could*.

"Science in school to take over the family business?" he scribbled, and bit into the pie. The rising crust stuff wasn't too bad, but it wasn't Chicago style. And the following drink of the 5 a.m. Saint could make make Dice forget if he was eating cardboard, frankly.

He kept the pad and paper nearby and pulled his magazine-in-progress off the windowsill, running down the reviews, and made a note to bring in some Blithering Idiot to run as a limited offer with the autumnal switch to Dennis' Quebecois onion soup and the tourtieres that Dice worried some diners might get into a fork fight over last year. They were *good.* They cost an arm and a leg because of all the handwork, but when Dennis made pastry the smart money ordered it.

The rest of the pizza disappeared with haste, and Dice washed the grease off his fingers before pouring a second glass of ale and getting back to work on searching the Internet--going back to the image search and looking over the pictures now that they'd become less pure. He took care to hover over each one to read the captions and make sure that they weren't his subject.

It was that care that meant he found the picture of a pre-teen girl, lifted off her feet into the embrace of a man in a navy ballistic vest stencilled with FBI. She had specks of blood on her face, mostly on the right side. She didn't hide her face into the man's shoulder, but rather stared directly into the camera lens, her expression blankly curious.

It was one image in a collection of photojournalism, mostly pictures of women and girls taken after traumatic events, illustrating an article about women's placement in news--the piece argued that portrayals of women as victims were more than twice as likely to be depicted in the media than women as authority figures. Dice frowned a bit when he read that, and then thought of all the TV and movies that used women in peril for plot devices and muttered, "That sucks."

The caption read, "Natalie Summers, aged 12, photographed shortly after FBI rescued her from her kidnapper."

Her kidnapper. Oh Mary, Mother of God. That blood on her face--Dice shuddered. He got up off the stool and headed for the Wall, writing it down, and then shooting a little line off it with the word, "crack?"

They must have shot him. That was stippled blood on her cheek, not a stream like you'd get from an arterial laceration-- This was not helping. He had the whim-whams.

After a moment a distant, oddly detached part of him thought no, this was worse than the whim-whams. It went right past the leaping wigguns and straight into red that burst like somebody'd put their thumb on a hose to make it spray, and the hot, wet slap across his face and he screamed--*he* screamed, Eddie hadn't--*no*

make it go, wash it

Go now.

He listened to that distant voice. He got into the shower, and turned the water up so hot he had to put his head between his knees when he got out. He dressed in flannel pants and a shirt with sleeves long enough that he'd cut a thumb hole in them and he clicked the Big Bell track and stood still and breathed, and when the resonance faded he set it to sound again in an hour, which is when he would drop everything he was doing on the Internet and stop.

It was right to go back so *It* didn't beat you, but it didn't help to push endurance. And it was okay that he didn't drink the rest of the beer. He could take that bottom blade steak out of the freezer and let it thaw. He did it right away, and added some dehydrated onion flakes, some salt, and some pepper, snapped the lid on and stuck it in the fridge. He could dump it in the slow cooker and be able to shred the meat with a fork by the time he got home. It would be good.

Beat you again, he thought, and took the trash out.

*

After a long night's sleep Dice woke up early again, and had that steak in the slow cooker while he cooked bacon and then fried eggs in the fat. It was a good thing. He didn't normally get through a carton of eggs without having to toss them. He put the bacon and the eggs on toast and ate them with a knife and fork. Two home cooked meals in one day? That didn't happen often. Team Resilience wins.

He took a little time on his laptop. He'd probably still have to figure out

exactly what day of the week his schedule allowed him to get to the library while it was still open, so he could spend an hour trying to find the story on the newspaper archive. He'd have to do it himself. It wasn't that he didn't want to pay someone at the Post to do the research for him so much as he didn't want to leave any kind of a trail, and requesting microfiche was more on the grid than he wanted to be.

But he knew of someone, an Internet someone, who kept her ear to the ground for weird stuff. Geraldine collected this sort of thing, and a slim chance was better than none. He opened up his laptop and used the amanuensis9981 identity to send her a note:

Geraldine, hey;

Have you heard any stories in the last decade about people dying of drug overdoses that seemed suspicious, but couldn't be proven, that were especially *weird? I'm thinking of someone who took a medication and died of an overdose of that medication, but the pill count was accurate or a witness could verify that the deceased had taken the usual dose, so an overdose shouldn't have been possible.*

He considered for a moment, then wrote:

I'm not even certain I have something truly weird here, but I caught wind of an odd story and I'm looking for background.

D.

He knew Geraldine would think of the most recent acquittal but that was all right. He didn't like the kind of attention that came with publishing that stuff, so she'd have the chance to publish it with her own credit.

And that was enough for today. He'd run over to the bakery and buy some rolls before work.

Part 2

Act I

Washington, DC, October 2012

It was busy, but not brutal. Lunch rush diners lingered, ordering another drink or asking to see the dessert board, and Dice had to go out to one of the tables to talk about the various beer selections available to one of the regular suits (a lawyer, of the sue-'em-till-they-weep sort) and his guest for lunch. Dice couldn't tell if he was wooing her for a lawsuit or just wooing her. Dice suggested sampling some wheat beers when she started asking about bitterness, and a bit of the Edmund Fitzgerald Porter for something

completely different, and the lawyer ordered a cheese board, with "whatever would make it interesting." Dice had to go do that himself, because he didn't expect the kitchen to remember which cheeses highlighted which beers. Debbie did the same for wines, so he warned Jenny that he was going to be in the back for a few minutes.

Cheese was market price, and Dice chose half a dozen varieties, adding thin slices of grapefruit, tart green apples, fresh slices of fennel bulb, a little cup of blackberries, and four perfect squares of dark chocolate. It weighed in at $46. Dice winced, but he wasn't paying for it. He tucked the ticket under the blueberry cup, and set it aside while he poured the first four samples of beer. He enjoyed doing beer samplers, and he was glad that the lawyer had come in later, because if he'd done it at high noon Dice would have wanted to choke the life out of him with his silk jacquard woven Italian tie. A proper beer sampling took a couple of hours, and they'd be winding it up in the middle of the after-work rush.

He took one of the big trays and a frame to set it on to get the sheer everything onto the table, handed the cheese ticket off to Jenny, and then stopped dead in his tracks because a man was shrugging out of a jacket next to The Chair, and it was--

Christ in a bucket.

Dice walked back behind the bar, marching straight over to The Chair. "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world," he said, and found that he was smiling. He reached across the bar to shake Solomon Todd's hand.

"Had to walk into yours, Dice." But he was smiling back. "I came looking for you. Hear you have weird stuff going down."

Dice gaped, and then dropped his shoulders and looked up at the penny-farthing in the rafters. "Geraldine. She told you?"

"She sorts my fan mail," Solomon Todd said. "I still get some. And when you asked her the very thing I asked her to watch for, she mentioned it to me. She didn't tell me your name, but I guessed. And correctly, I see. I figured if I was wrong then I could just have a club soda with some of that mushroom soup and shoot the breeze."

"Sure, okay, mushroom soup," Dice agreed. He was already pouring the club soda. "But I can't talk here."

"Tell you what. Make it just the soda, and I'll get out of your hair for a few hours," Sol said. "You're done at six?"

"Done at six, ready to go about six thirty. I don't know if my friend will want to talk to you. I haven't asked. I...haven't told him that I was looking into it,"

Dice explained. "And I don't know if what he's talking about is precisely your kind of thing, it's just..."

"Hair on the back of your neck started twitching?"

"Yes," Dyson said, and relief gently stroked his diaphragm into letting go.

"Right. Well, let's go have a beer anyway. You never showed up to my retirement party."

"You never told me you were having one."

"Well, I haven't had one yet, so it's not a complete snub," Sol said easily, and put down five dollars. "I'll see you then."

Dice watched him walk out, then turned to ring the drink in and nearly smacked straight into Dennis, who held a bus tray of stray beer mugs. He stood right in the middle of the aisle between the bar and the back counter, poleaxed look on his face.

"Dyson Jeremiah Cieslewicz, was that Solomon Todd?"

"My middle name's not Jeremiah," Dice said.

"You are in the kind of deep shit that requires a middle name for announcing your doom, so it's Jeremiah now. It was, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Dice said. "It was."

"And you never told me that you knew him."

"Uh, yeah, I guess I do," Dice said. His face was hot. He probably looked like the surface of Mars right now. Fuck.

"Holy shit. You have to invite him to eat here. I will split my ass in four parts to say that I made him a meal. You must," Dennis said.

Dice gently pried the bus tray out of his hands. "He's coming back here at the end of my shift. You can invite him yourself."

"Name of Hell, Dice," Dennis said. "Who else do you know?"

"Rupert Beale?" Dice said, and instantly wished he could have it back.

"Christ on a hay truck," Dennis said. "Dyson, are you a writer?"

Dice just laughed.

*

Happy Hour kept him busy, thanks to someone coming in on the tail end and asking the lawyer and his date/meeting about the small glasses and the crumbs

of their cheese board, and deciding that on word of mouth that he'd like the same thing. The guy was casually dressed, like he didn't go to work today, but Dice knew an expensive watch when he saw one. Dice went over and tried not to rush him, but the guy wouldn't be pinned down on preferences. Finally Dice suggested that he shouldn't try to find a narrow range of beer, but very differing tastes, and a very simple cheese board. After being assured that it was fine, he'd probably come back to do it again, Dice added a stiff card with lines for writing down thoughts about the beers and brought a pen along just in case. But the guy had one--a deep cobalt and gold pen, with a chased gold and silver fountain nib. They were attracting money. Maybe the suits would start riding bikes, too.

That made Dice grin at Jenny as he got his ass back behind the bar and caught up on drinks. He left his domain once more: to slap a Reserved card on the still-empty end of the big table, so Andy would have some help holding that end for everybody. Then he was mixing cucumber and rosewater martinis out of Hendrick's for a crew of women who looked like they were ready to unwind: updos came down, lipstick got refreshed, and laughter rang out by the pool table as one of the ladies proceeded to set up the balls for a game.

Gerry came in and disappeared into the kitchen, reemerging with a bus tray and got to work clearing off glasses, stopping to take drink orders along the way. Dice took the list of drinks from him and started logging orders on Gerry's ID. Dice knew everybody's ID and passwords, and used his powers for good, like making sure that orders kitchen staff took got entered as servers so they'd get a server's portion of the tip out for the serving work they did. Or making sure someone was logged in a bit early so it didn't look like they were always late, because life happened and everybody helped everybody else out and a good work environment needed to be hidden, lest some outsider come along and fuck it up in the name of productivity or some shit that didn't matter as much as people.

The place was swinging by five, the mash of voices loud enough to drown out the music playing for atmosphere. And one by one, the night-shift staff came in and took a bit of the load out of the day shift's hands, with bumped hips and handshakes and back-pats and everyone buzzing up to Dice to find out for real, he knew Solomon Todd, and they were meeting up here? Crazy!

So naturally they all found something that they needed to handle behind the bar when Sol Todd came in and sat back down at The Chair, every one of them wiggling an introduction. Dennis came out to express his respect for Sol's books and invited him to come and have a meal that it would be his honor to prepare. Dice was ready to seep into the floorboards and die, but Sol accepted Dennis' card, and kept up affable author for as long as it took for Dice to run his report, cash out, and declare how much of his tips he was taking home that day--forty bucks, to cover a meal--shit, he had that steak in

the slow cooker, fuck, but it was on low so hopefully it wouldn't turn into carbon before he got home.

Then Dice noticed the helmet. "You're on a motorcycle?" Once he actually got on the sidewalk he saw it, four spaces up, and that was the only bike on the block.

Sol said, "Yeah, I can give you a ride," but Dice was already clipping his messenger bag across his body, securing the hip strap.

"I've got wheels," Dice said. "Can we go somewhere westward?"

"Georgetown, Foggy Bottom?"

"Yeah," Dice agreed. "That'll be good. I've got something in the slow cooker."

"Ah. Can you recommend something closer to home?"

Dice took his time getting Stone Soup out of the rack, thinking.

"Or someplace close enough that you can take a quick trip there and back while I protect a table from floating away," Sol said, like it was no big deal to him.

"Naw, Georgetown or Foggy Bottom is close." Then to settle it, he said, "I live in Arlington. I haven't eaten there much, don't really know if talking skullduggery at Chipotle is quite the thing."

"I know a place."

"Lead on, then."

"I'm headed to Blues Alley in case we lose each other," Sol said, and headed to his Harley.

"I'll meet you there," Dice said to his back.

Act II

Dice waited for Sol to walk up the block to where he lounged next to his parked and locked bike, and he knew he looked a bit smug. Sol shook his head, smiling.

"Right. How long have you been waiting?"

"Oh, not long," Dice said. "I'm pretty sure only long enough for you to find a place to park. Where are we going?"

They were headed to a restaurant with enclosed booths, dimly lit. It looked like fifteen years ago it had been an "intimate dining experience" and the few-surprises menu took pride in their burgers.

"What on the list is right with burgers?" Sol asked.

"Any beer, honestly, but I'd pick the IPA on draft. It's decent. That or the bottles of Shiner Bock, though they're ringing them up high."

"Did you always know beer?" Sol asked, and then they had to order. Burgers, onion rings, fries, and bottles of beer that had to wait a moment while Dice asked for glasses.

"Didn't know a lot in Chicago. No control over the stock. But The Crank's owner is into gin, the lead bartender knows her wine, and I got to learning beer. Been on brewery tours, I read review websites, keep up with distributors. I said I could learn it and I thought that meant the usual Miller, Budweiser, and a couple of locals, but Stewart--that's the boss--got pissed off at a truly shitty distributor that didn't want to spend time on the small pubs, and fired them, vowing to never stock a drop of big-brew beer. He told me to take a class, whatever I needed to do, but I was going to be his beer guy and he'd cover the expenses. And so I learned. And fucked it up a lot the first year, but now I have a handle on it."

They kept chatting about that until the burgers came, and gave thumbs-up to the waitress when she came by to ask how everything was tasting, and it was good. Dice was pretty pleased with his, and Duke already had his half done.

"If we want something, we move the ketchup bottle or the empties to the edge of the table. Otherwise she won't come back," Sol said. "It's never really busy in here and they're casual about kicking people out. So. How did you get onto the story of Natalie Summers-Barrington?"

Dice paused before eating one of his fries. "A friend came in on the day the case was over. He was...angry. And he told me that he knew that she'd killed him, but he just didn't know how she did it," Dice said. "He didn't mention any names. He went to school with her. Georgetown."

"Good school. What did your friend take?"

"Psychology. Which only compounds the self-blame, if you ask me."

"Oh, I agree," Sol said. "You know that she pursued Biology and Chemistry, looked to be headed for Neurochem. Yes?"

"Didn't know about the Neurochem bit but it doesn't surprise me," Dice said. "Did you know she was kidnapped when she was twelve? I found a photo of her on a blog post about the portrayal of women as victims in the media. Looked like it might have been academic slash activist writing."

The lines on Solomon Todd's forehead creased, and he pressed his lips together in a flinch of sympathy. "I have...a fuller picture. I could probably get the case files, if we needed them."

We. Wait, we? Dice looked at Sol, giving him the Spock brow. "You want me to work with the feebs?"

"Well, I'm retired. And this might be something but right now, it's not official. I still sneak into the building to steal donuts off Hafs." He grabbed a big onion ring and bit into it.

"Or you could bring her donuts and ask her to rob the case files blind."

"They might even be online, they're from 1999. You want me to work with you on this?"

"Wouldn't I be working with you?"

"If you haven't noticed, you're the leader of the Idlewood Sunday gatherings even when the doctors show up. All of them. That's your ship and you're the captain. We are working with each other."

"That's nice of you to say," Dice managed. He didn't chop the compliment off at the knees, but it was hard to hear praise, even still.

"It's the truth. You find survivors, Dice. You bring them in. You're the best we have on that job. When it comes to your friend, you lead and I follow."

"All right. But you've got the chops for finding the backstory. We sharing information?"

"Yes," Sol said. "We definitely are. And I interrupted your story."

"Yeah, all right. Where was I at. Okay. They dated for a while, but here's the thing. He'd been suspicious of her, thought that she'd gotten a rival passed out drunk at a party for...something. He didn't actually say. Just that he knew she'd been there and he suspected that she was responsible. And he dated her *after that.*"

Dice took both bottles, set them on then end of the table, and sure enough the waitress was right there. "Refills?"

"Please," he said. "Can we get another fries and rings basket?"

"You bet," she said cheerfully, and took the cold ones and the burger plates away.

"I figure we're here long enough for one more beer to be okay."

"If not it won't be the first time I had to go back for my bike," Sol said. "So she's manipulative."

"I'd say that," Dice said. "He'd said that what happened to that girl was bad enough that she dropped out of school for it, and he still went out with Natalie

even though he thought she was Trouble."

Their beers showed up. Dice took them, and poured them to build a head, fast and sloshing. "And I gotta ask myself, why would he do that? Something he's been ashamed of for years, probably the thing that made him choke out of his degree--he didn't say that, but I got eyes. And he said that it was like she'd cast a spell on him, that his previous suspicions didn't matter."

"Very manipulative," Sol said.

"Doesn't mean supervillain powers. People manipulate others all the time, right, but there is something hinky going down here. Might be whatever happened with Ingrid Lessing at her college, the mass fear, suspicion...emotional *control.* With a bit of a push to help steer people. Maybe she makes them overdose and forget that they overdosed somehow. I don't know. I don't have evidence."

"But you'd bet money."

"Damn straight I would. That murder was impossible."

"The Houdini clause," Sol said. "Only no one in law enforcement flagged it."

"Well, it's not like they held her in jail for more than an hour," Dice said. "She's rich and powerful. Cops see that, they think she did it with money, probably assumed their way right past it, and they had a patsy right there--did her friend Kylie get the Teflon treatment? You already know this, right?"

"Some," Sol said. "She was in jail for a bit, and then Natalie's lawyers showed up to rescue her after they'd gotten Natalie out on bond."

"But not until after she'd been thoroughly disoriented by being thrust into a nightmare. Cultivating gratitude?" Dice asked, and picked up his glass.

Sol nodded. "That's what I would think. But they didn't move to sever and then hang Kylie out to dry, when they could have. She's not poor, but she's not at Natalie's level of wealth, not before her widowing or after. Instead Natalie and Kylie were shoulder to shoulder with a pack of feral lawyers guarding them, strategic press statements, both of them always together, playing loyal friendship all the way. She moved Kylie into the house, they were together during the trial, and they were acquitted together. It wasn't the easy narrative to take but they did it."

"That's...interesting. It's--"

Sol let him think, and Dice frowned over it until the fries and rings came.

"Friendship matters to her?" Dice asked. "Loyalty matters to her? It's not just manipulation, is it? People aren't just tools to her."

"There was no reason for Natalie to not discard her friend after the objective was achieved, so yes, I'd say that friendship matters to her...under certain conditions, at least."

"So that means... How likely is it she doesn't know what she's doing?"

"Each case--each host is different."

"But this one?" Dice persisted.

Duke reached into his bag. "Look at this."

"This" was a slim tablet, the newest model with the iconic logo on the back. He powered it up, gave it a couple of taps, and handed it over.

It showed a photo of Natalie standing next to an older man. Both of them were dressed in black, and Natalie wore a black brimmed hat. Dice figured the man with his hand on Natalie's shoulder was her father. He had white hair at the temples, and the strawberry bronze hair began high on his forehead.

Dice swiped and the next photo was of Natalie in black, a little older, holding a teenaged girl's hand, her head turned as if she was saying something to the blonde, who wept on Natalie's shoulder.

He swiped to the next one. Natalie, a little older, her black hat brimmed with a black mesh veil, standing alone.

Dyson watched photo after photo of Natalie Summers-Barrington comforting the children, nephews, nieces, spouses mourning at funeral after funeral. He looked up at Sol, who was looking at him with understanding the thoughts that crashed through his head.

"All right," Dice said. "Do you know how these people became dead?"

"There weren't that many postmortem examinations. One of these funerals--besides the one for Sheldon Barrington, that is--was under the veil of a suspicious death. I've got some obituaries scanned."

He took the tablet back, tapped and swiped and gave it back. They were scans of newspaper archives, some digital, some from microfiche.

Unexpected illness.

Short illness.

Misfortune.

One cover page of a postmortem examination, and cause of death was choking on her own vomit while unconscious, alcohol and sedatives in her blood.

"Holy shit," Dice said. "That's one hell of a single bullet theory."

Sol raised his glass to that. "If she doesn't know what she's doing, we stand a better chance. If she does know what she's doing..."

"She's the sneakiest serial killer who ever sneaked. This...is a lot of bodies."

Sol nodded and had some more of his beer. "And she'll be very, very dangerous. Gammas don't usually exhibit the kind of control she'd have to have to pull off hiding it."

Dice handed the tablet back to Solomon. "I noticed there were comments on tabloid sites about her having an eating disorder, although they seemed to be the same kind of sniping they hand to any woman--too skinny or too fat, never satisfied. But my friend made a point of how much she was capable of eating. Teenagers have a hollow leg, but impossible murder and a big appetite..."

"We're still looking at *if.* But I'd bet on it."

"Me too," Dice said. "Me too. Can the WTF go after her?"

"Strictly speaking, they've got no cause," Sol said. "And no formal request from law enforcement. That doesn't mean we can't advise them to lie in wait for her to do *something,* but it would mean another death. She's got rights."

"Yeah," Dice said. "You can't just buff the jackboots and go get her. Can I get copies of this?"

"Yes. I can send them to you. Proxied e-mail?"

"Let me give you my PGP key."

"That won't stop Hafidha," Sol said with a small smile.

"If Hafidha wants my ass all I can do is kiss it goodbye," Dice said. "I'm worried about mere mortals in the NSA and shit like that."

In the end, Dice gave Sol his PGP key, the amanuensis9981 e-mail, and the url for a web-based encrypted anonymous chatroom he named "bottom bracket blues" that he would create and lurk in, for stray comments that didn't warrant an e-mail...or a telephone call. Dice gave up his phone number, loath as he was to do it, and explained that it was only voice and SMS.

Sol had a card, and Dice fished into his pocket to enter the numbers right away. Solomon Todd looked at Dice's navy blue and silver Nokia 3310--no camera, monochrome screen, capable of leaving a crater when dropped--and gave it a solemn nod. Sol had a brand-new iPhone. He used a stylus--one of the doodads on a key ring that also had a little red devil duckie with flashing LED lights--and entered all of Dice's information, saving the text Dice used to send his PGP key.

"Requests for ringtone?"

"'Paranoid,' Black Sabbath," Dice replied, and Sol gave him a wry grin.

"Doesn't mean they're not out to get you. What are you going to do about your friend?"

Dice scrubbed his hair back, waving the little brick phone in his right hand. "I'm not sure. I've never done this initial part in person. And I still haven't figured out if he's hiding the superpower stuff because it'll make him sound crazy or if she hid it that well. If it comes up, can I tell him about you?"

"Yes. And if he wants to talk to me, I'll meet him or write to him or whatever he feels right with. But, Dice. Anything happens, anything, even if you feel like it might be silly, you tell me. Phone me. I don't want you alone on this. If you can't get me, call Chaz."

"Believe me, Duke," Dice said solemnly. "I will. Actually, you know what? One more thing."

And Dyson Cieslewicz gave the retired FBI agent his address.

*

Arlington, Virginia, October 2012

By some stroke of marvelous luck Dice hadn't just left the slow cooker on low, he'd dialed it to between low and "keep warm." There was burned-on sauce happening at the edges, but it hadn't gone completely dry. That skin on top was a reduction. Yeah. He added some of a bottle of molasses-based barbecue sauce, and shredded the steak with two forks. It tasted caramelized, not--okay, a bit burnt. But he wasn't hungry, so he turned it off and put the ceramic pot in the fridge.

He ran the carpet sweeper around and tidied before he turned to the laptop and checked his mail. There was mail from Sol. He'd sent it just a few minutes after they parted, so Dice entered the key and downloaded all of the files.

He read Sol's account of the 1999 abduction first. It began with a summary of the beginning of the fiscal year of 1996, after Colin Summers' company had closed a small pharmaceutical cosmetics company that they had acquired and had cut Gordon Spicer from the company payroll with some severance, but with no rights to the research that he had done during the acquisition.

Three years later, Summer's company Sunshine Supplements offered a cosmetic product that came from Gordon Spicer's research on medium-chain fatty triglycerides as a protectant for hair and skin. Meanwhile, Spicer had trouble sticking to employment as "erratic" behavior spotted his employment records. An associate who'd been interviewed said that most people believed

that Spicer had a drug problem because of his dramatic weight loss and personality changes. The product's debut was probably the stressor that moved Gordon Spicer to follow and plan to kidnap Natalie Summers.

But when Natalie had first gone missing, no one had known any of that. Natalie's mother had called police when Natalie disappeared between a Neiman Marcus and a record shop. She had wanted to buy a new CD, and had agreed to meet her mother at the food court in twenty minutes. She never showed up.

An AMBER alert had been issued, the FBI involved, but Natalie had disappeared, and no communication had come to demand ransom until two weeks later. The orders were followed and the usual team of undercover police assigned, but no one showed up to get the ransom drop.

A completely different set of demands came, two weeks later, and the ransom stayed right where it was left, and no one came to get it. Then the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit had enough information to suspect Gordon Spicer, and the operation to rescue Natalie ended in Gordon's death, shot by a sniper.

Natalie had witnessed her abductor's death (Dice knew that blood on her face had come from a bullet) after being held captive for six weeks.

Dice sat back and rolled his shoulders, stretched, and finally got off the barstool to stand. Sol hadn't entered the chatroom, so Dice sent him a quick, encrypted message:

"Six weeks is a long time to be held by a gamma. But was Gordon Spicer a gamma?"

A few minutes later, a reply:

"He was still shouting and trying to grab Natalie after being shot in the head. It could have been a bad shot, but it took another one to stop him. Not conclusive, and the ACTF didn't exist then. No one could have known about the anomaly, so Spicer wasn't handled the way we handle suspected gammas. If it had been even two years later, things might have been different--if the right string of coincidences presented itself."

No, not conclusive. But it was a lot of that thing he didn't believe in, and he was glad that Sol was on this. He'd have never found all this information. He wasn't on his own, and that helped him when he double-checked the door and window locks before he went to bed.

He wasn't in this alone.

Washington, DC, October 2012

Everyone in the damn world decided to come have brunch before going to the nice and easy ride, which met up at the shop around the corner, so The Crank was slammed hard enough that Dice spent more time busing tables and doing prep than pouring drinks (besides coffee, which he ran through the tables). Every time he went into the kitchen he loudly told Dennis that this was his fault. Well, it was. The man made crepes, and they were really, really good. But everyone cleared out by one and left the bewildered staff to take a moment to breathe and take turns eating brunch, which was late for everyone instead of early, as it usually was on Saturdays.

Dice got by on a cup of fruit and coffee, then a muffin, then a cup of yogurt, then a good half dozen slices of bacon, all little offerings brought to him while he cleaned keg lines and weighed every open bottle of everything they had, taking a break to eat a spring greens salad and read the bar book, which had entries ranging from notes on customer alerts to bright ideas to truly awful puns, written by whoever was on staff, and found a note:

"Dice--Tyler came by last night (which is today, as I'm writing this) to find out if you had tomorrow (Saturday, which will be today when you read this) off, I told him you didn't and he said he was going to try to get there by six and please don't leave if he's late because he's doing bike maintenance 101 for women and he'll be crunched, he wants to talk to you about something and doesn't have your number. <3 Debbie"

"Something" likely to be Natalie, Dice figured. He probably didn't have anyone else to talk to. He circled the note and scrawled "thx <3 D" next to it, message received, and then left a note about doing the keg lines and the liquor weights, and asked, "Anyone know why we got slammed for brunch Saturday? Is it something we ought to plan for or was it just random?" and paged back to see if anyone else had mentioned the same thing, but no one had.

He started looking for Tyler around 5:30, which really was too early but every time the doors opened he looked up. Couldn't help it. When Tyler did arrive, he glanced over his shoulder when locking up his bike, looking back the way he came. When he came in he looked at every patron seated, as if he were scanning for someone he was supposed to meet, trying for casual but just a little too tense.

"IPA?" Dice asked, but Tyler shook his head and leaned close. "I wanted to talk to you. But...honestly? I'm a bit weirded out."

"Something happen?"

"It's probably nothing. No, it's stupid," Tyler said. "Did you have plans or

anything? For tonight?"

"No," Dice said. "I'm not a wild Saturday night kinda guy. I go to the movies with Mary Lynn sometimes, but generally not. What got you weirded out, though?"

Tyler shook his head. "There are a million black sedans in this town."

Dice glanced over Tyler's shoulder to the window, and his gut started kicking to get free. "Kept seeing the same one?"

"No. Kept seeing the same two. Dumb. Probably a car service."

"Maryland license plates?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Because I just watched one roll by. KWX-941?"

"Shit."

"Don't think the cops will help," Dice said. "When did you start seeing them?"

"I noticed one parked partway up the street when I got out of The Knitting Loft. And then another one passed me on the way to the community center. Then when we were outside riding in circles on the basketball court, there was a black car parked, and it was still there through the whole class, then the first one was just driving down the corner when I left." Tyler gripped the strap of his bag, knuckles white.

"Okay, take it easy. You do have something to be freaked out about," Dice said. "You probably are being followed."

"Plenty of reason to be around Capitol Hill even on a Saturday, but up here in Logan Circle? What did I do, why would anybody be following me?"

"Don't worry about that now," Dice said. "Think about this morning."

He steered Tyler to sit down on the end of a bench and took the chair at his right hand. "Sit, close your eyes, feet flat on the floor, hands palm down on the table. Start at the beginning, from when you first walked outside. What did you do?"

"Went up Fourteenth," Tyler said. "I always go up Fourteenth. It's the only way to go."

"There's cars parked in the street?"

"Yeah, there's cars," Tyler said. "People who live there park in the street."

"So they're usually the same, parked in about the same spot. Do you notice

anything different?"

"There's the Explorer, the red new Beetle, the Bronco's not there... Yeah, shit, there was a black sedan parked near the corner. Too new for my street. They know where I live." Tyler's eyes popped open. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I'm not sure," Dice said. "Do something for me, right now. You have a phone, right?"

"Yeah."

"Take it out, open up the back, and pull out the battery. Just turning it off won't help. Take the SIM card out. They might be tracking your phone, and better safe than sorry."

Tyler cracked open his phone and tipped it over to let the battery fall into his hand. He pried the SIM card up with his thumbnail, stuffing the chip into his wallet. Dice had his bag on already, and pulled the straps tight, hooking the waist belt. "We're going to get out of here, and we're going to lose them. It'd be easier on a weekday but we're gonna lose them, scofflaw style. When we get out, I'm gonna head north but it's just to shake them. We're going to Arlington. That's where I live."

"Let me lead," Tyler said.

"Okay, you can lead," Dice agreed.

"And stick on my back wheel," Tyler said, headed out the door. "You never did an Alley Cat race. I have. Stick on my draft. If we get chopped--no. Don't get chopped. Stay close enough that you can hear me." Tyler had his keys out, and he pulled his logo-free all-black track bike out of the rack. Dice's Beef Gravy Surly looked really gaudy next to it. "You ready?"

"Yeah."

"Trust me," Tyler said. "And stick close."

*

They didn't start out hell-bent for leather at all. Tyler went northeast to Logan Circle, and took advantage of the light traffic to get into the left lane and curb hop into Logan Circle Park. Not too fast, but Tyler went across the park before hooking left to roll down P Street.

"Just making sure I'm not jumping at shadows," Tyler said, and then "Shit. There's one. Oncoming. Hard right!" and he hopped the curb again to duck into a parking lot and salmoned up Church Street, which was little better than a one-lane alley but Tyler looped back to zip down a two-foot-wide laneway beside a little church and into a back alley, going upstream in the bike lane on

Q Street.

They were going to die. Tyler was starting to speed up, clipping up the sidewalk to ride north, and Dice barely cleared the intersection before the light changed. There was an outraged honk--two, and Dice felt bad for them but he was too busy looking for black sedans with tinted windows and trying to stay in Tyler's draft without hitting his back tire.

He really should have started playing bike polo. It would help his agility now.

They stopped at a light, and Dice just put his feet down so he could look around, lifting his back tire so he could crank the pedal in place. There--no, diplomatic plates.

"U-turn," Tyler said, and wheeled into the crosswalk, hooking left to go back south. Dice cussed and got caught up just as Tyler was dodging right, back onto Church Street and onto a path too narrow for a car between the back end of a pretty Methodist church and a fenced-in playground.

"Gonna stay out of sight for a bit," Tyler said, taking it easy again. "They're together, I figure, so they're talking, and the more time we stay out of sight, the better--cross here, fast." And they were going the wrong way up the street long enough to duck into another alley, swerving potholes and cracked asphalt looking for the next turn...right, and back into the narrow single-lane Church Street, but at least they were going the right way.

"This is one of my favorite streets, you know," Tyler said. "I'd like to live here. Left, going to Dupont circle."

"You are crazy," Dice said, and then "Behind us," and pushed into it because Tyler stood up on his pedals to check traffic on the circle and called, "Straight through, quick." They scooted around the triangle island of sidewalk and zipped over the crosswalk, and then they were dodging pedestrians to ride over the lawn and then back off the park to head south.

"Seriously, you're being followed by mysterious men in black cars and you're talking about real estate?"

"Keeping my mind off it," Tyler said, and went no-hands to shift his sling bag. "He went for it?"

"Yep." Dice saw that their tail had committed, forced to go all the way around the circle while they darted back onto the street like minnows, escaping southward.

Tyler said, "Fuck, I'm too predictable," but he jammed back onto an alleyway and gradually got them onto M Street, headed east. Dice had the whim-whams. Every black sedan he saw made his stomach drop like he had just run off a cliff, and following Tyler into the teeth of DC traffic on a Saturday was

more excitement than he wanted in an entire year, thanks. But while on the street and not swimming upstream into oncoming traffic, all he needed was speed and to listen for Tyler telling him what damnfool thing he was going to do next--

The light ahead turned yellow, then red--

"Right! Hard right!" Tyler hollered, and the noise that escaped from Dice's throat while he rocked his bike into a harder turn at speed--terror. But he made it, even though the guy in the Ford Fiesta was *still* leaning on his horn, sorry, sorry. Tyler was giving it more speed, enough that Dice's heart was pounding and his breath was coming up short and they were headed straight for the White House--

The White House! And its glorious perimeter of no-vehicle traffic, where a bicycle may boldly go and be well out of sight of anyone trying to track them while driving. They slipped in between lanes, gliding to the head of the line, and waited at the light on K, poised on their pedals.

"That where we're headed?" Dice managed to call.

"Yes. You hurting?"

"No," Dice panted. "Getting harder."

"That's fucking right you are. Go!"

Dice's legs were burning, but he went like an arrow loosed for Lafayette Square, and barely resisted the urge to whoop as they backpedaled and braked to slow down for the peds wandering about, chasing invisible butterflies with their cameras or whatever mad things peds do. Dice looked over his shoulder, but he couldn't tell if that black car was one of theirs or not.

He waved anyway.

*

They rode along the Reflecting Pool and then Tyler took the lane around the Lincoln Memorial. Dice bemusedly followed, mentally willing his adrenaline to stop pumping. They even took the lane across the bridge, passing Sacrifice and Valor without even looking up. They charged into the left lane like they owned it, going around the circle and straight into the Arlington Memorial Cemetery.

"You lead now," Tyler said, and Dice pushed ahead, taking a winding route gradually north. It took some jiggery pokery to get through the car-centric snarl between the cemetery and Dice's apartment, but Dice got on North Lynn Street bold as polished brass, making the left turn onto Lee and skipping up onto the trail at the last second. From there it was just getting their bikes down

a grassy slope and across the back lawn, but the street in front of Dice's building was quiet.

They took the stairs at a trot, Tyler just behind, and Dice got the door shoved open to wheel his bike through getting his bike up on the wall just to let Tyler in, and headed straight for the laptop.

Sol wasn't in the chat room. Dice groped for his right side cargo pocket, and of course his right hand went stupid on something as simple as a button when Tyler said, "Dyson, what is this?"

Oh. Right.

He stood up straight, booting the power on his phone and looked at Tyler, who was staring at The Wall with his jaw hanging open. It was...pretty full, with the name Natalie Summers-Barrington smack-dab in the middle of a web of bubbles and lines in different colored chalk, the odd paper note taped up here and there.

Oh how the fuck did he wind up in a canoe with the devil laughing at him.

There were a number of ways to not handle this, and one that might work. So Dice opened a few steps back from the impulse to explain. "You know what it is, right? The structure, I mean."

Tyler turned away from it to face him. "It's a mind map. Combination note-taking and brainstorming board. And it's about--her. You--Dice, I want you to tell me why you did this." Tyler looked careful. Neutral. Listening.

Therapist face.

Fuck.

"First, let me tell you my key. Everything in yellow is verified, cited, or sourced. Orange is speculation, ideas. Blue circling orange means the idea didn't prove out with my resources. White is first draft, editorial comments, directions to research. Now look at the map again, now that you know the key."

Tyler looked again. "What does 'crack?' mean? You circled that in blue and pink. What's pink?"

"Pink is information I got from somebody else. Like you."

"I didn't tell you 'abducted 1999.'"

"No, that was something I found when I was looking into it. Did you know? That she'd been kidnapped?"

Tyler stared hard at that wall, at Dice's clumsy printing. "She never told me

anything about it. What's crack mean? Are you saying that she was an addict?"

"I don't know if she's an addict, but that's not what I mean by crack. It's jargon. I can explain it, but first I'd like your permission to call someone. And then I will give the phone to you, and you can talk to him. To Solomon Todd. May I do that?"

"Solomon Todd knows that you've been...stalking my ex-girlfriend?"

"Investigating," Dice said. "With Solomon Todd, the writer. Who is Retired Supervisory Special Agent Solomon Todd of the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI. Will you speak to him?"

"You're not trying to tell me you're not crazy."

Dice gave a soft laugh. "Oh, I have PTSD. I score a 6 on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale. I'm a survivor of abuse and I'm still recovering. But you probably guessed all that just from knowing me, the past three years."

Tyler's gaze darted to Dice's left hand.

Dice held it out so Tyler could look at it. Tyler took it, raising Dice's left hand up to the light, feeling over the scars, the bones, and then put his finger along Dice's palm, and after years of treatment Dyson knew what that meant. He curled his fingers around it, as much as he could, pressed with each finger individually.

"Is it how your hand got hurt?"

"It is," Dyson said.

"Is it why you moved here from Chicago?"

"It is," Dyson said.

"Is it why you get your tattoos?"

"It is," Dyson said.

"Call your friend," Tyler said.

Dice pressed the green button with his thumb.

Act IV

Sol answered on the second ring, and Dice said, "Hey. My friend and I are at my place. He was being followed. We lost them, but I think we need help, and I'd like you to talk to him, he's right here."

Dice handed the phone over. Tyler took it, and stuffed himself into the one

wingback Dice'd snagged out of the junk room. Dice went into the kitchen, more to give Tyler a little privacy--well, such as it was in here--and wound up boiling water for tea and putting the shredded beef in a saucepan to reheat later. He ran water in the sink and scrubbed at the burnt slow cooker dish, but he wasn't done before Tyler handed him the phone.

"He says he's coming here." Tyler leaned against the Wall. "And not to worry."

Dice dumped the water out of the pot and refilled it with hot. "I'm sorry, Tyler. I really am. I wasn't sure that you were having the same kind of problem I had, but the things you said about Natalie made me think of it. Did she ever do anything you thought of as unusual? I mean...hang on."

He left the pot to soak and dried his hands. "I do have a couple beers but I think we ought to keep a clear head. I've got a lot of tea in the wooden box, pick your bag," Dice invited, and took down the two mugs that matched, the plain white ones that weren't chipped. "My little brother did this to my hand. And he killed people, people who were left-handed."

"Devil's hand," Tyler said, checking out the tags on the tea bags, choosing mint. "Old-fashioned Catholic school stuff? And you're left-handed."

Dice poured hot water in Tyler's mug and his own, apologetically offering sugar packets for sweetening. "Yeah. He--wanted me to stop. He was left-handed too, but he learned to use the right. I didn't, really, and he was obsessed. Bad childhood. But he killed people, with one left-handed punch. And he was superhumanly strong. This thing happens to people. Not all the time, but enough. Something bad happens to them. Something traumatic, like abuse. And then they get a knack for something. Like my brother's superstrong left jab. It hooks onto a talent. He was a boxer." And Chaz with his perfect math and pattern recognition. Maybe that's why *It* didn't take Dice--because he didn't have any talents.

"Natalie was--she was strong. Not like you're saying, though. But she could carry a lot of weight, and she wasn't buff, you know? She was skinny. But she carried around textbooks and an eight-pound laptop, never complained."

"I know another story," Dice said, and invited him back to the main room with an after-you gesture, hot water and tea bags soaking. "About somebody who could--kinda mind control. He could make people afraid. Suspicious. Threatened. And he'd feed off those feelings, they gave him something he needed."

"But how does it work?" Tyler ignored the wingback chair this time, favoring the floor and the big pillows Dice kept pegged to the wall as backrests. Dice sat cross-legged so they could see each other, set a chipped saucer between

them for the tea bags.

"It's different for everyone. But they have this in common--they eat. A lot. My brother started eating a lot, our grocery bills went crazy. The guy who could make people afraid, he always had some kind of junk food on hand, people didn't think about it. You told me Natalie could eat a lot."

"Yeah. She could eat a lot," Tyler said. "Whole pizzas, I said."

"You know her," Dice said. "I've been trying to figure it out, on the Wall there. I have more on my computer. I got it from Solomon Todd. He was one of the FBI agents who was there in Chicago, when they were looking for my brother. I didn't know Eddie'd killed people. But they figured it out, and they brought him in. He's in a hospital in Virginia. That's why I have the car. I go to see him every week."

"I--" Tyler looked at the wall. "You're saying she killed him. Her husband. She did it. With a--superpower, like comics."

"And maybe a bunch more," Dice said. "And Solomon was already looking into her life, probably the day she was acquitted. The day you came in mad."

"Hasn't even been a week." Tyler looked at the wall. "But no proof?"

"No. But who would want you followed, Tyler? Can you think of any other reason? You know they were following you. I know it, too."

"No, nothing," Tyler said, and just then the intercom buzzed.

Dice didn't head for the speaker right away. He woke up his laptop and opened a program so a color webcam took up the whole screen, showing Solomon at the door. Only then did he cross and buzz them in, watching to make sure no one followed.

"I didn't notice an entry camera," Tyler said.

"Thank you," Dice answered. "You could find it if you knew it was there."

"You wired your front door for video surveillance?"

"I still wake up thinking he's standing by the bed," Dice said. "I need a little more proof than most people that I'm safe." He tapped a spot on the screen and the picture split into four, tracing the path from the front door up the stairs and to Dice's apartment door.

He opened it before Sol knocked, and let him step in.

"You found an apartment smaller than Chaz's old one," Solomon said, and smiled at him like this wasn't really an emergency visit.

"It's a bit monastic," Dice agreed. "This is my friend Tyler. He was involved

with Natalie. This is Solomon Todd. Fight each other for the good chair, I'm putting the kettle on."

Tyler had already gotten to his feet, friendly smile in place. "Mister Todd."

"Sol, please," Solomon Todd said, and he stayed standing while Dice looked for a random mug that didn't look so much like a hand-me-down.

"I understand you're just now getting some answers," Sol said. "It's all rather a lot to take in, though, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's--I'm not sure what to believe. I don't doubt Dice's word about his brother, but I don't know if that's what explains Natalie."

"And neither do we," Sol said. "We're guessing at what exists in the interstices of what we do know, but your friend isn't condemned yet. The anomalous manifestation is one explanation, but it could be something else, and not connected to this at all."

"But you don't believe that," Tyler said.

"I think she saw you. That's a guess," Sol said. "You were in the courtroom on the day of the verdict."

"Yes," Tyler said. "I had to go see it, though. They weren't letting cameras in."

"Got it," Dice called, and brought out a tray with the third mug and a little tin teapot full of hot water. He held it while Solomon poured water on top of a bag of jasmine tea. "I never had guests over."

"I lived in an apartment like this," Sol said, looking up at the high ceiling. "Still remember it fondly. Bed's up there?"

"Yeah. Closet and bathroom under it."

"Dig the security," Solomon nodded at the laptop. "Yours?"

"Yeah," Dice said.

"And you gave up the safety of your home for a friend," Solomon said, and Dice shrugged. Tyler watched him over the rim of his cup.

"Safest place I could think of," Dice said. "Didn't think the cops would listen."

"I didn't, either," Tyler said. "I didn't think anyone would listen."

"Sorry I didn't tell you about this earlier," Dice said. "I wasn't sure if you were having the same thing as I did, or if you knew. I would have taken more time, but there wasn't."

"It's all right," Tyler said. "I don't know if you're right. But I--wait," he said.

Everyone stayed quiet, and Dice set the tray on the corner of the sink.

"She could have seen me," Tyler said. "After the verdict. She turned around. To face the gallery. I was standing up. I thought she looked at me, but I had thought that she wouldn't recognize me. I looked different back then."

"Maybe not as much as you think," Sol said, quietly. "She might have recognized you right away, or it could have been later."

"If she killed her husband, do you think she killed her father? He died of an overdose, too."

"Could show him the file," Dice said. "The funeral photos, what you know about the cause of death for that one, alcohol and sedatives."

"The bad dog," Tyler said, and gave an embarrassed chuff of laughter when Dice and Sol turned to look at him. "She told me exactly how alcohol worked on the body. She was helping me with a class unit about drug use, addiction. She called it the bad dog, because the way she drew the molecule looked a bit like a dog. She told me how you make it, all kinds of stuff. Could she do that? Could she--make more of the molecule? So her husband had a couple of drinks and died with point oh four one blood alcohol?"

Dice nodded. Slowly. "There's another story. About a guy who could dehydrate a body so it was basically a mummy. There's been others who could poison people, right?" He glanced at Sol for confirmation.

"We call it transmutation," he said. "And it manifests in a number of ways."

"Do they need to have consumed the drug first? Or can she just...make it?" Dice asked.

"You can't make something from nothing. She said that," Tyler said.

"So if you don't have anything to drink, she can't make you overdose on ethanol."

"She may believe that," Sol said. "One of the earliest transmuters we knew of ate arsenic as part of his mythology."

"Transmuters," Dice said. "I just had an idea, but it's blasphemous, so let's forget it."

Tyler laughed, then immediately looked contrite. "I'll have to go to confession for that."

"You still go to confession?"

"I lapsed years ago," Tyler said, and shrugged. "But I was sure tempted this week."

"Yeah." Dice had tried it. But he couldn't confess everything, so he couldn't go up to take communion. Because he didn't go up for communion, everyone knew he hadn't gone to confession--fine for your first Sunday, but not the second. The eyes were too much, and so he stayed home. Before anyone could ask him why, or start guessing what he wouldn't confess.

"So did you ever get drunker than you expected, around her? More stoned?"

Tyler shrugged, but he was looking up at the ceiling, not down. "You remember I told you that she could make you feel like you were the only two people on Earth?"

"Yeah."

"She really could, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that--some people have it. They pay attention to you, they listen. She could do that. But I couldn't get enough of it. Maybe she was doing something to me. But not drugs, not drinking."

"Serotonin," Solomon said. "Oxytocin."

"Hell," Dice said. "Not even staying sober would help."

"You guys really know how to cheer a man up," Tyler muttered into his mug.

"Ha! You were the one who practically giggled his way across Washington while under pursuit, you maniac, while taking ten years off my life--that right turn onto Sixteenth just about made me pizza," Dice complained, but he was grinning, too.

"The people who were following you," Solomon said. "What happened there?"

Tyler and Dice both started telling the story, filling in each other's details, but Dice left Tyler to explain how they'd dodged and evaded and broke the law to get away from the cars he'd noticed since leaving home that morning. Something snaked between Dice's shoulder blades. Something wasn't right. He looked up at Solomon, then at Tyler, who faltered in explaining to look back at Dice, confused.

"It's not right," Dice said. "They got made, and they knew it--so what were they going to do, shoot us?"

Tyler shook his head slowly. "They might have been able to box us in. Would have, if we weren't mashing."

"You took off, and they chased you," Sol said. "You're right, it's not the right

thing to do unless you're trying to intimidate."

Tyler huffed, wryly. "Well, I was intimidated. What do I win?" And that's when it hit Dice, quick as a clout on the ear.

"Oh fuck me," Dice said. "She forced us to castle."

"How much time did you spend away from your bicycle, Tyler?" Solomon asked, and stepped back when Tyler dove for his bike, running his fingers under the stem, crossbar, downtube, then just hauled up the front wheel and put the bike on its saddle and handlebars.

The scrape of Velcro separating put a chunk of ice in Dice's belly, and Tyler held out a black disc with electrical tape over the top.

Dice snatched it and peeled the tape away to reveal a green LED. "Christ in a bucket."

"I'm sorry, Dice," Tyler said.

"You didn't know. I'm mad at myself. I should have known. Herded like lambs, we were. Fuck. She might be headed this way."

"To your housewarming party?" Solomon asked. "Well, that would be rude, wouldn't it?"

"Is that what this is?"

Solomon nods. "It is now."

"Your cameras," Tyler said, and they all turned around.

"Oh, oh fuck, fucking hell," Dice said, and watched Isabella dig around in her bag for keys. She had the bag in the crook of her elbow with her arm raised, a shiny can of beer held aloft. She teetered on platform spike heels when she turned around, and accepted a steadying hand from another woman with long red hair in a gray coat...

"Oh fuck no, not Bella, please--" Dice groaned, but Bella lurched when the front door opened. Natalie steadied her again, removing the keys from the door with a black hand--covered in a glove.

"Touch, she needs touch," Sol said. "She held Bella's hand. Don't let her touch you."

Dice moved toward his phone, on the kitchen counter where he'd left it. "I'm calling 911, we have to get an ambulance for Bella."

"She could escalate when emergency services show up," Solomon warned.

"Bella could die," Dice insisted. "She needs a hospital."

"Let me," Sol said, and had his iPhone at his ear already. "Cop talk makes it go faster. We're going to have to be really careful. She's going to be at close quarters in here."

"We try to put one more person in here, we're gonna be a group hug," Dice groused, but he opened a wall cabinet and took out full-fingered bike gloves, passing a pair to Tyler. "Just in case."

"Excellent idea." Solomon dug some thin leather driving gloves out of his pocket. They had holes over the knuckles, but he held the phone with his shoulder and put them on.

That was all they had time for before the floorboards by Dice's door creaked, and a knock sounded.

Dice looked at the door, muttering, "Shit. No, hang on."

He went for the door and turned the lock, and then backed away. "It's open!" he called out, louder.

Natalie halted just on the threshold when she saw that there were more than just Dice and Tyler in the apartment, then looked at their gloved hands and pursed her lips. But she stepped through, and turned to snap the lock behind her.

"Standing room only, I see," she said. "I thought I could just come and apologize for any anxiety my security might have caused. I thought I saw you at my trial, Tyler--I barely recognized you. You're looking well." She paused, and looked him over again. "Quite well."

"You came to apologize," Tyler said. His tone was as flat as three-day-old beer.

Natalie drew off her right glove, and Dice watched her long-fingered hands. "As I said, I barely recognized you. I wasn't sure it was you. And I wanted to be sure it was, but it turned out to be such a disaster. I'm terribly sorry, Tyler. When I found out what happened I felt I had to come by and explain."

"And you knew where I was, because one of your 'security' planted a GPS tracker on my bike," Tyler said. "Most people use Facebook."

No, no, don't get her mad, don't set her off --"But you weren't sure if Tyler would want to talk to you," Dice interrupted. "You broke his heart at Georgetown. You must have known, he'd be hurt when you broke up, and sometimes catching up can be so awkward."

"Yes," Natalie said. "I wasn't sure how to get back in contact, but this was a mistake. I'm so sorry, Tyler. This was really rude. Inappropriate." She wrung her leather gloves in her hands, brow twisted with the need to smooth it over,

and Dice caught himself frowning.

Was this an act? If it was, then she was good. She looked down, ashamed, and said, "But when I saw you it all came back to me, and you know what, I just kept thinking about you." Eyes back up, the struggling-through-it-all smile...

Was this an act?

When she smiled it was so...vulnerable, somehow.

"About me?" Tyler asked. "But it was years ago." Tyler had let a bit of uncertainty change his tone. Dice flicked a glance around the room, but no one was moving, or trying to speak.

She could make you feel like you were the only two people on Earth.

"Do you remember when we talked about music, and you played all the stuff you liked? About Thea Gilmore and the White Stripes?" Natalie asked.

Sol's gaze was riveted onto Natalie, who never even looked anywhere but at Tyler. She lifted up her shoulders, let them fall, and smiled when Tyler said, "Yeah."

"And how we'd go for those long, long walks? I wished I could have gone on another walk with you, to talk about--just stuff we liked, how you talked about Wolf's Rain and about how *Kill Bill Part 1* was all about Asian live cinema from the '60s and '70s. Everything was so simple then. I was stupid," Natalie said. "I thought you were staid and...ordinary, but you were steady. Reliable. And I went looking for excitement without realizing how much I gave up when I broke up with you."

"We're all stupid at eighteen, Natalie," Tyler said, gently. "About a lot of things."

"Yes," she said, and the smile she gave him was like a sunrise. "But seeing you made me remember, and...I missed you. And I wanted to talk to you but I was afraid of what you'd think of me, after all these years, but I wanted to see how you were, if you were well. I wanted to be your friend again."

"But you thought it might be awkward," Tyler said, and Dice wanted to shake him. What if they were wrong about touch, what if they were wrong about all of it? He opened his mouth to say something, but then realized that Tyler's expression was smooth, attentive...careful.

Therapist Face.

Dice shut his damn mouth and pretended he was a statue.

"I don't think it could have been anything but awkward," Natalie glanced at him, and her smile was just for Dice, the bob of her head an acknowledgment,

assurance that he hadn't been forgotten. "Your friend is very understanding."

"Oh, oh yes. This is my friend, Dyson. And this is Natalie, the girl I told you about."

"Friends call me Dice," Dice said. He thought he knew what Tyler was doing, and there was no time to second-guess. Just trust and stay in his draft.

"Hello, Dice." The smile widened.

"And this is Solomon," Tyler went on. "I only just met him today."

"I recognize you," she said. "I've read your books. Pleased to meet you. I'm sorry I interrupted your visit."

"Housewarming party," Solomon said.

"The place is so small, I have to have them in shifts," Dice added, and Natalie laughed.

"I would have thought you were talking about me," she said, and one hand glided through the air to measure the Wall, which she probably only saw at an angle. "That's a lot of investigating. Is it for a book, or a longer article?"

And just like that, the serene charm gained an edge, and Natalie looked intent, her smile sharp.

"No book, Natalie," Sol said. "Just interest."

"And why would you be interested in me?"

"I think you know," Sol said.

"Oh, I don't like to assume, Mr. Todd. Why don't you explain to me?"

Sol opened his mouth, but Dice spoke. "You were abducted when you were twelve years old."

Natalie's gaze whipped back to land on him.

"Out of a busy shopping mall on a nice day. I figure that means he didn't just grab you and shove you kicking and screaming into a van. He had a ruse. Security guard?" Dice asked. "Did he tell you he was trying to find you, that your mother had collapsed?"

Her lips pinched together, but she didn't answer.

"And that the ambulance was already there, but you had to hurry. So you followed him. You were scared and worried, you didn't think that it might not be true. You were still too young to be suspicious," Dice said. "And then he--what? No one reported a scream or a struggle. He drugged you, maybe. He

did something so you couldn't scream, couldn't fight. And he took you."

"You don't know anything," she said.

"You never told anyone what happened to you. You never said," Dice said. "But I know it was bad. I know he hurt you. I know that you tried to keep believing that someone would rescue you."

Natalie didn't speak, but she stared at Dice, jaw clenched.

"And then one day you didn't have any hope left. No one was coming to get you. Your whole world was the rooms you were never allowed to leave, and him," Dice said. "You had no way out. You had no choice, Natalie. You did what you had to do. To survive. I know, Natalie. I did what I had to do to survive, and I did it every minute of every day. I know. It wasn't your fault."

"No one could understand."

"No one understood," Dice agreed. "No one understood what happened, and they all treated you differently. Nothing was *ever* the same again. You were alone, and there was no use telling anyone what it was like, because they'd pity you. Or give you stupid advice. They couldn't understand. What happened to you is something no one can know unless they had the same thing."

"You're like me?" Natalie asked. "Are you--like me?"

"I can't do the special thing you do, Natalie. The thing that protects you. But I was hurt by someone who could do a special thing. Just like you. He had a power, didn't he?"

"Don't talk about him," Natalie said. She had to force the words out.

"Okay, we don't have to talk about him," Dice agreed. "It's okay, you don't have to talk about him. Not until you want to. But can I make one guess, Natalie? You can answer yes or no or say you don't want to. Is that okay?"

Natalie nodded.

"He was trying to make you like him. That's why he kept you. Is that right?"

"I don't want to--"

"It's okay," Dice said. "It's not your fault. You didn't ask for this. I just want you to know. I know that. You just did what you had to. You were lonely, and you wanted friends. You wanted love. You wanted to make the feeling that there was something deep inside that made you--"

"Don't."

"Okay," Dice said. "And you figured it out. Because you're really good at

science, and you wanted to understand."

"It's just chemicals," Natalie said. "Love, happiness, fear, hopelessness--just chemicals. It's not *real.* Love isn't real. I can make you love me," she said. "I can do it."

"But it doesn't fill up the emptiness," Dice said. "Because I wouldn't really love you. I would just be doing what the chemicals made me do, so you couldn't ever fill up the emptiness."

"Nothing fills it," Natalie said.

"Everybody has to build inside that hole differently," Dice said. "They don't tell you that. They don't tell survivors how to get better. You have to figure out what fills the hole for you."

"I tried that!" Natalie shouted. "I tried, and I tried, nothing works, nothing!"

"That's the catch," Dice said. "It's really, really hard to do alone. Did you ever try making a friend without the touch?" Dice asked. "You're a scientist. You must have tested. Did they all fail?"

Natalie shook her head. Tears ran down her face, and she sniffled. "Kylie. Until...until the bail hearing. Two years. For two years. Not any more, though."

"Two years is really, really good," Dice said. "That's a long time."

"But she didn't trust me anymore, and I couldn't...I needed a friend," she said, and the sob she couldn't hold down burst out into tears.

Dice stuck his hand down his back pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, and Tyler tensed. Sol put out an arm to stop him.

"No, it's okay," Dice said, and walked forward, arm outstretched.

Natalie looked at it and laughed, still crying. "What an old-fashioned thing to have, that's--" But she took it, careful not to touch Dice. "Thank you."

"It's okay. There are more people like you, Natalie. You can get help."

Her shaking head denied it. "They'll put me in jail."

"It's not a jail," Dice said. "It *is* a hospital, though."

"A nuthouse."

"You'll have psychiatrists," Dice said. "And people who know about your diet. You need to eat so much, because--"

"Metabolic load," she said, and blew her nose.

"Of course you'd know that," Dice said. "You'd know a lot. You could help study it, even. Kind of a weird way to become a scientist again, I guess." He smiled at her while she dabbed at her eyes. "I think it could help you."

"I don't know," Natalie said. "Maybe nothing can help me."

"Look," Dice said. "Maybe you don't have to decide right now. Maybe you can try. Maybe you can still go home, and go out to the hospital to talk, and make up your own mind whether you need to stay there or you don't. It's never been tried this way before..." He looked at Sol, who looked uncertain.

"Because once you're in you don't get out," Natalie said. "I'd be alone forever. At least, at least if I'm free I can be with people, even if--no. No, I won't do it. I won't!"

"Okay," Dice said. "You don't have to."

"You're lying. They'll make me."

"No, Natalie. No one can make you. You haven't done anything wrong."

"That's a lie and you know it."

Now Solomon spoke. "Strictly speaking? It doesn't matter if it's true or not. You can't be prosecuted for your husband's death. There are no warrants out for your arrest. You can walk out that door, and no one can stop you."

"You'll just wait until I do and lock me up," Natalie said.

"Or you could promise," Dice said, loudly, so she'd look back. "That when you wanted to hurt someone, that you would call for help. Then you won't do anything wrong, and you can't be locked up."

"It doesn't work that way," she said. "You know it doesn't."

"But it might," Dice said. "Just now, you could have used your gift on me, and you didn't."

"How do you know I haven't?"

Dice held up his gloved hands. "You need to touch. Skin to skin."

Natalie nodded, and crumpled the handkerchief in her fist. "In the movies when the lady tries to give the handkerchief back, the man tells her to keep it."

"You can keep it," Dice said. "I've got loads of them."

She laughed, three syllables worth and a little watery. She put the handkerchief in her pocket, and then slowly drew her gloves on.

"It could be a style statement," she said, holding her gloved hands out for

inspection.

"For as long as you need to," Dice said.

"Do you really think they'd let me stay home?" Natalie asked.

"I think that you could go home. I think that with the right treatment, you could."

"But that I'd have to stay," Natalie said. "The first time I walked in, I wouldn't come out for--a long time."

"There's a very good chance of that, yeah," Dice said.

"Do I have to do it now?"

"Sol said that there's no cause to arrest you. You can walk out that door, if you want to."

Natalie tilted her head and gave him a look. "You think I couldn't hear the cops pulling in?"

"Ambulance," Dice said. "For Bella. I have a camera on the front door, on the laptop. Do you want to see?"

She stayed leaned back, face turned just so she looked at him sidewise. "You think I didn't hear the floor creak outside?"

Oh, shit.

"That's a friend," Sol said. "I asked him to come. And he didn't break down the door because you're still safe. You still haven't done anything wrong. You could open the door, and see for yourself."

Dice gaped, and then shut his mouth. "I didn't hear that."

"I did," Natalie said, and then louder: "I'm unlocking the door. Count to three and open it. I won't touch you."

She turned the lock and disappeared behind the Wall, emerging in the tiny area that held Dice's standing desk slash eating table.

"Clear," Sol said.

The door swung open. Daniel Brady led with his pistol, but he stepped inside and closed the door.

"Hey, Tank," Dice said.

Brady nodded and waved one purple nitrile-gloved hand. "Hey, Dice. You're a little too brave for your own good, you know that?"

"I--can see the merit in your argument," Dice said, and all the adrenaline he'd been holding back burst through. He leaned back against the wall to wait for his knees to stop shaking. "How long were you out there?"

"A few minutes," Brady said. "Your neighbor is at the hospital. I got a follow-up on the way in." Then he turned, and nodded in Natalie's direction. "Ma'am."

"This is Dan Brady. He works for the FBI. He used to work with Solomon, before he retired," Dice said.

"Agent Brady," Natalie said. "You've got the power to arrest me, I believe."

"Ma'am, I do," Brady confirmed. "But Dice is right. You haven't done anything wrong. I can take you up to the hospital tonight, if you like."

Natalie reached slowly into her pocket, and produced a set of keys. "I don't think I should ask anyone to ride with me. But if someone would bring my car home?"

"I can," Dice said.

"I would like to make a list of the things I want with me," she said. "My housekeeper can have them packed for me. I think we'd better go now, before I change my mind." She held her hands out before her. "I expect I need handcuffs."

"I think that would be best," Brady agreed. "Duke, a hand?"

Solomon moved to help. "I can ride with you. I'll pick the bike up later."

"Tyler," Natalie said suddenly, and everyone quieted.

"Natalie."

"I used my gift on you. I'm sorry. I don't expect you to forgive me," she said.

"I don't know if I can," Tyler said. "But thank you."

"Dice," she said.

"Natalie."

"I wish I'd met you a long time ago."

"A long time ago, I would have been just as confused as you," Dice said. "But thank you. It's nice of you to say."

She had one last smile for them both before Sol and Brady took her out the door.

*

Tyler didn't want to be alone, and Dice didn't blame him. So he poured the last two Saints, and the look on Tyler's face as he met the hopped-at-every-stage red ale was utterly gratifying.

"You should have this at the Crank."

"Can't. American beers only. This is from Scotland. And it's dear."

"I guess you're not driving that car back yet?"

"No, I'd rather drive a strange car in daylight. You feel like eating? I've got shredded beef and buns."

They ate, and it was still pretty good, and Dice let Tyler talk about whatever he wanted--sometimes about Natalie, and sometimes about music, movies, games, and war stories of bike culture when it was more underground. When the sky paled and Dice blew well under .08, he and Tyler took the wheels off their bikes and trotted downstairs to return Natalie's car.

"All right. The keychain says Audi. Willing to bet we can't figure out which car it is until I use the locator?"

"Mm, I don't really know cars," Tyler said, and held the door open for Dice. "But on the other hand..."

He pointed at a deep espresso black A8, parked directly across the street.

"Jesus H. tapdancing Christ," Dice said.

"I am not into cars. But Holy Shit," Tyler said.

"You wanna drive?"

"Fuck no, I wanna mess with the stereo."

*

The car had voice navigation and led them up into the Northwest, which wasn't a surprise. Money couldn't buy happiness, but it could buy a great big house at an expensive address. They pulled into the motor court and whistled at the stately Tudor manor.

Kylie raced out of the house while he and Tyler were still putting their tires on. She demanded to know what happened, and Dice's explanation let Kylie assume that Natalie'd gone for treatment of her eating disorder, which Kylie believed she knew all about. He gave her the numbers for Dr. Baylor and Dr. Ramachandran, saying that she should speak to either one of them.

He and Tyler set off for the recreational pathways, riding side by side on the trail when Tyler asked, "You said something about a Sunday meeting. What is that?"

"It's for survivors," Dice said. "We need support groups just like anyone else who went through trauma, but we can't exactly get specific in just any old group, you know? Sol goes to meetings, but nobody's a cop or a doctor in group. We're survivors."

Tyler dropped back, giving way to a dogwalker with four standard poodles cheerfully hauling her along, then slipped back in beside Dice. "How do you add people to the group?"

"We look for them on the Internet, where they're trying to find somebody who won't think they're crazy. We have a website, publish some careful stuff in the tinfoil-hat rags. We have a mailing list to keep in touch, because we only have meetings every other month. Some of the people come in from a long way off."

"Specifically. How do I get in?"

"Oh." Dice went no-hands when they hit a straight part of the path. "I give you access to the mailing list, and you catch a ride with me down to Ashton. Next meeting's on the first Sunday of November, if you want to come."

"Day after Tweed. Hey, are you working that Saturday? Do you want to go on the tweed run?"

"I don't have any tweed," Dice said.

"We can fix that."

"Even so, I'm working that day *because* of Tweed," Dice said. "But I'm off at six, if you wanted to go for another ride after. Or go get some beers, or something. I have to work Wednesday, too, because of Hallowe'en."

"Yeah, makes sense. And we could go get beers, sure. Unless you're tired of beers."

"I'm never tired of beers," Dice laughed. "Proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy. Or do this ride again, this trail is nice."

"Even with the hills?"

"Sure," Dice said. "Good way to get harder."

They rode on in silence for a bit, until Tyler said, "What you did with Natalie."

"Yeah?"

"I couldn't have done it."

"Are you saying I should be a psychologist?"

"Well, yes but that's not what I mean. I thought of her as a threat. You didn't."

"I did, too. But then I realized something, and that's what made me speak up."

"And what was that?"

"That before Natalie became a killer--if she became a killer, mind you, so let's say before she started forcing people to love her or be her friend, she was a victim. Worse. She was a victim alone, and no one understood her. And no one she could talk to. Isolation makes gammas. The loneliness, the feeling that you're alien to everyone, and no experiences to stand against it, no proof that you're not what the monster in your head says you are."

"No proof that it's more than just chemicals," Tyler said.

"She's who you were talking about, when you said nihilists were boring."

"I was. And that was unfair."

"You didn't know. Nobody knows. Partly because it's suppressed by every government everywhere, but that's tinfoil-hat talk."

"Maybe not. I mean this could cause panic."

"Maybe it would, but maybe a lot more people could get help. Too many of us think we're alone in what we feel, and fear that we can't expose ourselves and still be accepted. That can't get easier if suddenly you've got some ability from out of a comic book. That's a lot of weight to bear."

"So don't carry it all?"

"Yeah," Dice said. "Exactly. And making sure that people know you'll share the burden, so you don't break under it."

"Somebody to say, 'Fuck you, get harder.'"

"And then be there to help you do it. Yeah."

"I'm gonna sprint that next straight stretch. You with me, or do I wait for you at the curb?"

Dice felt the sweat between his shoulder blades, the ache in his thighs. "I'm with you," he said.

4.09 "Apolysis" - by Emma Bull and Will Shetterly

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Janesville, Wisconsin, December 2012

The basement was dark, but she wasn't blind. The least light was enough, and air moving, and awareness of heat and moisture. Especially the latter, right now, but thirst was a good motivator. Work now, drink later.

The dusty metal of the air duct was slippery, and every movement made a reverberating scrape or clatter of sound. The bent, battered vent cover laid black bars across the view of the dim room beyond, and framed a hole just big enough to squeeze through.

She imagined *forward*. She imagined the taste of food and the undisturbed peace of home, and she envisioned it out there. Her own stomach ached with hunger. Forward.

The floor was shining-smooth and nearly as loud as the duct, tick-tick-tick. Hurry to a corner, press against it, and wait. The floor was motionless underfoot, and the space silent and empty--not just an absence but a palpable quality of not-there. She pushed around the corner into a high, wide angular volume of air--a hallway.

Against the dark stood the darker rectangles of doorways, and one outlined with a fog of light. A closed door, with light behind it, and moisture barely breathing out from beneath it. The bathroom.

The sound of rushing water quivered the air, and the floor vibrated with the thunder of it in the pipes. He would come out in a moment. Hurry to the door before he opened it. He'd be blind in the hall after the dazzle of the bathroom light.

The door opened in a wave of brightness that broke into dark as he snapped off the light. Before her was the pillar of warm and throbbing life that was her prey.

Calloused skin, that rough living leather, was no barrier at all. And why did blood never feel the way she expected it to?

She envisioned hurry, and flight, but light blazed again suddenly overhead. He must have found a wall switch.

Her own ears heard screaming, hoarse and broken-pitched, a man's terror. She cowered down in the cold behind the junipers, even as she ran, tick-tick-tick, across the bright tile and forced through a grate into the warmer darkness of the floor vent.

She was so awfully hungry. *Home. Warm. Food. Foodfoodfood.* Did the neighbors hear the screams from inside their houses? Would they call someone?

She didn't like that scream. The others had been quiet. He'd sounded so scared...

Of course he was afraid. He'd thought he was big and everyone else was small. Now he knew that didn't make any difference.

This is what I want. This is what it's like to be the one who makes the rules.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, DC

"And the *second* toxicology report," Nikki Lau announced as she came through the briefing room door, holding a fax aloft.

Arthur Tan looked up, his canted eyebrows making his whole face look basset-houndish. "Why do I assume it confirms the first one?"

"Her tone of voice," Hafidha Gates replied. "She sounds way too happy for it to be all a mistake."

Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner suppressed a smile. A man was dead, and it was possible someone had murdered him, and in those circumstances, one ought not to smile. Not to mention she was down to five agents, the stressful winter holiday season loomed, and no one was bombproof.

But as she looked around the table, she saw strength, stability, and a kind of fluid eagerness: five people who knew their jobs and one another and were ready to put that to use.

They've never been better. Then she pushed the thought away. Overconfidence might not be punished by the gods anymore, but it was still bad for judgment.

Chaz Villette lifted his gaze from his phone and, presumably, Google. "So we

really are talking venomous spider?"

"*Australian* venomous spider," Lau answered.

Daniel Brady, in the chair nearest the door, heaved a sigh that would have shaken window glass, if the room had had windows. "And the day started so well."

"Is Rydel Pope still the only victim?" Falkner asked.

Lau palmed her bangs off her forehead. "I asked Detective Baumgartner to look for any other suspicious deaths, or deaths of anyone connected to Pope. But so far he's our only confirmed spider toxin victim."

"So how do we get to murder from there?"

"Besides the Australian funnel-web spider venom in Wisconsin, which sounds like a mythology based on Hercule Poirot?" Tan fingered the ends of a nonexistent moustache.

Chaz held up his phone. "Behavioral science. Specifically, spider behavior. These guys don't wander around hunting prey; they wait for it to come to them. If a spider this size had a burrow in the house, someone should have spotted it. They need heat and humidity, and Wisconsin in December during one of the driest years on record should have killed this one or forced it into dormancy, even if it managed to survive the trip home in someone's suitcase."

"You've bookmarked that web page, haven't you?" Hafidha asked.

"That's 'cause I'm not you."

"So, Houdini clause," Falkner acknowledged. Because if it didn't make sense, it was the purview of the WTF.

Brady frowned. "Wait, what do you mean, 'a spider this size'?"

"Um. Well, the tox screen shows robustoxin, so if there's an actual spider involved, it has to be a Sydney funnel-web, which means..." Chaz slid one finger on the touch screen. "...up to two inches." He held out his phone to Brady. There was a photo on it.

After a heavy silence, Brady grunted. "Big enough to shoot, then."

"I thought you'd swear," said Chaz.

"There's not enough profanity in the whole goddamn world."

Falkner knew she'd have to look at that photo. "We don't know there's a spider involved. Someone may be using the venom."

Lau answered that. "The coroner found puncture wounds in Pope's right heel

consistent with a spider bite."

"Fangs," Tan said mournfully.

"Really small fangs," Hafidha offered.

"Not for a spider."

"Before we commit to making this trip, I'd like to get more data. Hafidha, I'd like you to find out if this spider is in zoos or collections in the U.S., especially..." Falkner looked again at the case documents in front of her, checking addresses. "Why do I recognize Janesville, Wisconsin?"

Chaz sat stone-faced and Brady was on his way there, but it was Lau, in a nice semblance of professional detachment, who replied, "Sullivan College, 2008. Tim Miner had an apartment there."

"Tim Miner." Hafidha looked up and added brightly, "Oh, yeah--wasn't that the case where Reyes tried to get Brady to shoot Chaz?"

Too late to try the "I will drown you if you open your mouth" look Falkner used on her children.

But there must have been something like it lingering in her expression, because Hafidha turned from her to the rest of the team. "Oops. That's one of the things I'm not supposed to say out loud, isn't it?"

It was Brady who answered--Brady, for the love of everything. "Well, why the fuck not? I was *thinking* it." He grinned at her.

After an instant, she grinned back. "When the zombie apocalypse comes, I promise not to eat you."

"Can't ask for better than that," said Chaz.

Brady eyed him sideways. "Hell, you won't wait for the zombies."

"There's a lot of meat on you!"

No one made reference to the thing they didn't believe in, but it lay there in plain sight. And it changed the game, just enough. "Lau, tell Baumgartner we should arrive sometime this afternoon."

"Do we all go?"

"Lau, Villette, and Tan. Brady, you'll stay here to catch anything else that comes in. Hafidha, I'd like you here, with maximum resources." She had no idea if Hafidha's resources were ever finite, but at least here, Brady would be close by to feed her and, yes, keep an eye out if she was in trouble.

Hafidha probably knew that, but all she said was, "Good. I'm going dancing

with a Boy tomorrow night, and I don't want him to think I'm more interested in giant spiders."

"Even if you are?" Lau asked.

"Especially. It would be rude."

"Y'all know I've got your backs," said Brady.

"Especially if they have spiders on them." Tan cast his gaze heavenward and declared in a respectable version of Texas, "Christ in a shoebox with holes in the lid."

"Almost me," Brady said. "If you come back alive, I'll give you some pointers."

*

Nikki Lau leaned on the door frame of Hafidha's sanctum, her go bag weighting her right shoulder. "You have a date with a Boy?"

"Yep." Hafidha rocked back in her chair and settled her feet (in cobalt-blue cowboy boots) on her desk. Data flitted across the monitors like birds in a rain forest.

"Anyone I know?" It was a vain hope, and Lau knew it, but she asked anyway. Hafidha didn't date people her friends knew, and she never dated them long enough for her friends to change that. *Except Erik.* It might even be healthier that way. Lau was certainly no authority.

"God, no. I met him at the gym." Hafidha licked frosting off her fingers. "The artisanal cupcake: God's apology to jammers. He's Lithuanian, or Latvian, or something. He said he could bench-press me, so I made him prove it."

"He *bench-pressed* you?"

"Mm-hm. Do you have any idea how much core strength it takes to be a good barbell? If he can't dance 'til closing I'm going to taunt him publicly." She snapped her fingers, and the left-hand monitor stabilized on a news broadcast: archived from the 1980s, to judge from the fluffy, layered hair of the reporter on screen.

Lau took a deep breath. Once there'd been someone else Hafidha could count on, someone who'd ask her the tough questions in the right way, who'd know what the answers meant. *Agent Lau, you're no Daphne Worth.* "I get the feeling..."

Hafidha kicked off from the desk to pivot her chair and face Lau. "This isn't Twu Wuv?" She smiled and laced her fingers together behind her head, and Lau knew she was definitely not getting past Hafidha's personal bulletproof

glass today. "Oh, honey. I'd sooner do heroin than that shit again."

"Nikki," Falkner called from the open door to the bullpen. "Call Detective Baumgartner. Tell him to have the local hospitals order the antivenom, and rush the delivery."

"On it." She pushed off the door frame and plucked her phone from her jacket pocket, trying not to feel rescued.

"Good girl," Hafidha said. Her expression was gentler than her words. "Now go catch your plane and bring me home a gamma to play with."

*

The Rock County sheriff's office was part of the same complex as the county jail, and it all appeared to be built of sandstone Lego blocks. Across the divided highway, a cornfield lay bleak with winter stubble. Falkner felt the lack of trees the way a small animal might feel an absence of cover.

Inside, before she could identify her team to the dispatcher, a short, heavy, mostly bald man sprang forward from a passage behind the desk. "You the Feds?"

Lau recovered fastest. "Special Agent Nicolette Lau. I believe we talked on the phone--"

The man shook Lau's hand once, thoroughly, as if it were the shaft of a lug wrench. "Detective Mike Baumgartner."

"This is ACTF Agent in Charge SSA Esther Falkner."

Lug wrench again. "That's a mouthful, huh? Thanks for coming."

Falkner watched as Lau introduced Tan and Villette, who behaved like model FBI agents. Tan always had, of course, but even Chaz managed, nowadays, to suppress his feral streak in front of strangers.

"Agent Lau said you needed a place to set up. Come on." Baumgartner lunged back down the passage, never looking back to see if they'd followed.

"It's nice to be wanted," Lau murmured, with no sarcasm.

Falkner knew what she meant. Detective Baumgartner behaved like a man whose salvation was at hand.

No pressure. She led her team after the detective.

As they passed the shoulder-height walls of the county detective staff's cubicles, Falkner could see men and women at their desks. They half looked up at Baumgartner as he passed, then transferred that almost-furtive gaze to the team, careful not to catch anyone's eye. Falkner nodded to them anyway

and pressed her shoulders a little further back.

Baumgartner led them into a windowless room where a folding table and chairs were squeezed between a row of lockers and several dozen stacked file boxes. Two boxes had been drafted to serve as a stand for a ten-cup coffee maker and an empty peanut can stuffed with sugar, fake sugar, and creamer packets. One wall was mostly clear above waist height, where someone had propped a medium-size whiteboard with a blue marker and an eraser.

Falkner watched Lau, Tan, and Villette, but they gave no sign that the accommodations were anything but what they were used to. *Good for them. They spotted it, too.* Falkner tossed her dark wool coat on top of the boxes out of the way and turned to Baumgartner.

"It's crap, I know," he said, flushing. "We're short on room--"

"And you're the only person in this department who believes we have cause to be here." Falkner leaned on the table, which was sturdy enough not to shift. "Are you in trouble because of this?"

"No, no..." He raised his hands, but they dropped as if of their own accord. Surrendering to honesty. "I was already on my way out. Taking early retirement. I don't fit in too well, you know?"

This small, round man with his abrupt speech and awkward body language--no, nothing would make him fit in except extraordinary ability, the kind that had worked for Chaz, for instance. "Yet the Sheriff's Department authorized sending for us."

He turned a darker red. "I guess I can be pretty pushy."

"You could have let this case slide. We're still not sure it *is* a case. No one would blame you."

"I never 'let one slide.' I'm not going to now." Suddenly he smiled, showing a mouthful of worn teeth and a tricksterish delight. "Besides, this time the brass can't even warn me off. What are they gonna do, fire me?"

Chaz was already starting a pot of coffee, while Lau set up her laptop on the table and Tan unpacked files. "How did you know to call us?" Falkner asked, taking a manila jacket with the FBI seal off the stack.

"You cover the Batman cases."

The three agents she'd brought to Wisconsin were hard to surprise, but each, in his or her own way, pulled up short at that, if only for an instant.

"The what cases?"

Someone other than Baumgartner might have passed it off as a joke. "Where

there's some crazy weirdo who kills people with some crazy shit for some crazy reason. I follow a lot of LEO sites. And that bank robbery thing in Chicago--hard to miss."

Falkner thanked Justice and her scales that he'd only mentioned law enforcement sites. She'd been afraid, seeing the sneaking stares of his coworkers, that they might be treated to gammas mixed with black helicopters and smallpox-infected illegals.

Falkner pulled out a chair and sat down. "Well, we're not superheroes, but we've done all right so far. Have you found any other cases that might be related to this one?"

"I asked the county coroner to look for 'em. Should be calling back any time now. One piece of bad news, though."

"Oh?"

"We got two local hospitals, Mercy and St. Mary's. Neither can order the antivenom based on one guy getting bit." Baumgartner raised his shoulders, straining his blue dress shirt. "Budgets."

Two brisk raps at the door startled even Baumgartner. It swung open, and a sturdy-looking woman with graying red hair in a brown tweed trouser suit stepped in. "Thought I'd just bring these by, Mike. Is this the FBI?"

"Lee! We were just talking about you. Agent Esther Falkner, this is Lena Gretsch, Rock County coroner. You could have just called."

Gretsch shrugged one shoulder and laid a short stack of folders on the table. "In the time it takes to stand in front of the damned fax machine, I can drive over."

And you could have got someone else to stand in front of the fax machine, Falkner thought. Romance? No, nothing about either Baumgartner or Gretsch suggested that kind of relationship. Falkner recalled again the walk through the bullpen on the other side of the door. Gretsch had just run that gauntlet, when she didn't have to.

Lena Gretsch was with Baumgartner on this one.

"Dr. Gretsch, thank you for this. We need as much data as we can get." When Gretsch smiled and nodded, Falkner added, "You might be able to help us with something else, as well. Detective Baumgartner says the local hospitals can't order the antivenom for this toxin on the basis of one death. Is there a way--"

"I'll lean on 'em," said Gretsch. She tapped the folders she'd brought with her. "You want to look these over and call me?"

"If you have time, I'd prefer you stay and brief us on them. Can you?"

Gretsch pulled out a chair. "You betcha." She lifted the first folder and held out a photo of a middle-aged woman. "Jean Marie Fernandez. She was a real sweetie, the best clerk the Rock County assessor's office ever had. Thought it was a stroke because she was heavy, but..."

"Yes?"

"There were no other risk factors. Which happens. So without an autopsy looking for--"

Baumgartner chipped in. "Batman shit."

"What he said," Gretsch agreed. She opened the next folder and showed a photo of a balding man, probably twenty years older than Fernandez, also heavyset. "Louis Kirkland. You got Kirklands out east? No? Then you haven't seen his Loony Lou ads. Which weren't funny, no matter what some people think, but they weren't enough to make some mad scientist want to kill him."

Falkner said, "But you think he was killed?"

"No, just that, well, if you're looking for undetected neurotoxin poisoning, he's got to be on the list. But anyone would be comfortable concluding for stroke. High blood pressure, high serum cholesterol, type two diabetes--" Gretsch shook her head. "I really need to start a zumba class."

"Do you have blood or tissue samples from Fernandez or Kirkland?" Lau asked.

"Death by natural causes." Gretsch looked sour, and Falkner wondered if there was a fight over this in her past. "I can start the process for exhumation orders, but that'll take weeks if they go through at all."

"Then we'll see if these three have any above-ground connections," Falkner said. "What can you tell us about Rydel Pope?"

Gretsch tipped her head to one side, as if giving one hemisphere more room to work. "Well, being spider-bit doesn't mean somebody killed him. Almost any time someone's bit by something poisonous, it's a young guy showing off."

Lau said, "Pope wasn't young."

Gretsch said, "Not to you, sweetheart. Most men don't grow up until they're your daddy's age. You know the joke about the redneck's last words?"

Tan drawled, "Hold my beer and watch this."

Gretsch nodded.

"But he was alone in his house in the middle of the night."

Baumgartner said, "Far as we know."

Falkner asked, "Is there a reason someone would want to kill him?"

"There was, once. He did time for selling meth, but when he came out, he started bouncing at Road Rabbits, out on I-90."

Chaz blinked. "He what, where?"

Baumgartner grinned. "Road Rabbits is a bar."

Gretsch added, "Where the dancers are not exactly rated by the quality of their dancing, if you know what I mean."

Baumgartner said, "Pope was a bouncer, so maybe he bounced the wrong person. But Road Rabbits is pretty nice as strip clubs go--" He glanced at Gretsch and added, "Or so I hear. The manager said Pope was polite and discreet and dependable. But you never know who's going to get a hate on for you."

"Got any theories yet about how this spider ended up in Rydel Pope's house?" Gretsch asked.

Baumgartner raised a cautioning hand. "We didn't find a spider in the house, or any sign there'd been one."

"I've studied that body, Mike. There was a spider."

Falkner looked to Tan, Lau, and Villette, and could see they'd all gone for the same speculation she had. Mythology. If a gamma believed there was a spider, would the results be the same as if there really was one? "It's possible there was a spider, and it was there by accident. Not likely, I admit. But stranger things have come home unnoticed in vacationers' luggage."

Gretsch looked thoughtful. "If this thing were exclusive to the Wisconsin Dells, sure. But around here, a big vacation is Disney World, or Branson, Missouri. If Pope or any of his pals had gone to Australia, you bet it would have come up."

Falkner laid her palms on the table, preparing to rise. "We'll start with victimology, now that we have more than one possible victim. Lau, Villette, get what you can on Kirkland and Fernandez. Agent Tan?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Let's have a word with Rydel Pope's employer."

It took a second to sink in, but when it did, Tan's blank face was everything

Falkner had hoped for. "*Oh.*"

It cost her even more effort than usual not to grin. "If I bring Chaz, they'll card him."

"I resemble that," Chaz said.

"Go on, New Fish," Lau crowed. "Just remember, the boss is watching."

*

Ten minutes after Falkner and Tan went out the door and Baumgartner and Gretsch left them to their preliminary digging, Lau's phone blared the "dot-dot-dot-dash" of Beethoven's Fifth. Across the table, Chaz raised his eyebrows.

"V for the win," Lau told him, and tapped the screen. "Hey, Hafs."

"Hey, you. How are the cheeseheads?"

"We haven't lost any since we got here. Though we do have two more possible victims. Hang on, let me put you on speaker."

"Hey, sis," Chaz said to the air.

Hafidha's tiny digital voice said, "Hey, baby bro. Eat something."

"Yeah, yeah. What have you got?"

"I have a Wisconsin connection for your eight-legged pals."

"Not that I mind, but why not call Mom?" Lau asked.

"I did. She's got signal dropout. I had no idea you were leaving civilization. Shall I FedEx you sushi? Besides, I think you secretly like spiders."

"It's not a secret. Just don't tell Brady, or he'll call me every time he finds one in his house."

"I heard that!" Brady's voice echoed faintly through the phone speaker.

Hafidha ignored him, apparently. "Okay, the Sydney funnel-web spider put a Wisconsin date on its world tour. To wit, Dr. Jon Jablonski, professor of invertebrate biology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, was one of a few people studying them for, okay, I'm not sure what. But he raised some in a lab on campus."

"Are they still there?"

"No, and neither is he. He got bit by one of his subjects and died before help could get there."

"Another good reason not to study invertebrate biology," Chaz said. "When did he die?"

"Fall of 2011. So, bit of a gap between him and your maybe-victims."

"What else do we know about him?"

"He and his wife were in counseling."

Lau sighed. "Okay, HIPAA violation much?"

"He's dead, he won't care. The wife still lives in Madison, and works for a health insurance firm. No suspicious blips relating to her. I'm thumbing through the records for the rest of the zoology department now, though."

"E-mail what you've got so far?"

"Oh, honey, I did that nanoseconds ago. Keep me on speed dial, babies.

Act II

The figure on the sign looked like a bunny-eared Jessica Rabbit riding a chopper in a bikini. Underneath her, in purple neon: "Road Rabbits. Where the fun's always hop-pening." The building's gray cinder-block walls made Arthur Tan say, "When the zombie apocalypse comes, a person could do worse than hole up here."

Parking by an old Jeep in the snow-splotched lot, Falkner glanced at him. He said quickly, "I meant, it's seriously defensible. Solid doors, hardly any windows--"

"Uh-huh."

"I did!"

"If you say so."

"You're enjoying this."

A hint of a smile touched Falkner's lips.

Tan said, "I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?"

Falkner shook her head as they got out of the car. "I would never embarrass you that way."

"Thank you."

"I would embarrass you long after you'd forgotten about it. Probably at the next Christmas party by telling Padma about that time we were in the field together--"

"Note to self: use Buddhism to avoid Christmas party."

"You're Buddhist?"

"Oh, look, here we are. At the place we're going."

The building's black steel door swung wide just before they reached it. A blank-faced man in a parka and business suit walked quickly toward a black Lexus, never looking right or left.

Tan said, "Huh. Maybe the zombies are already here."

Falkner looked from the businessman to Arthur Tan. "I never thought zombies would make me feel old. They're supposed to be slow and in black and white."

"As long as they say, 'braaains,'" Tan replied, "they're all good."

As they stepped into a cool, dark hall that smelled of liquor and lavender air freshener, the bouncer's voice cut through Pitbull's "Don't Stop the Party": "Welcome to Road Rabbits." He looked like a potbellied Viking in black jeans and a charcoal gray T-shirt with the club's logo in pink. "See some I.D., please?" He stared narrow-eyed from Falkner to Tan. Ah, right--bad form to bring a date to a strip bar. Customers were supposed to pay for company.

Falkner flipped her credentials into view. Tan followed with his. Her flip was much smoother than his. "We'd like to speak to the manager," she said.

The bouncer squinted at her and Tan. Tan stared back. He had to admit, they were all nicely unperturbed. Finally the bouncer, deciding on the path of least resistance, said, "I'll let him know you're here. Unless you tell me not to."

"That'll be fine," Falkner said. "We've just got a couple of questions."

After another squinty look that might be the result of wondering what his boss had been up to, the bouncer snagged a phone receiver off the wall and thumbed a button. "Jack? You expecting the FBI? Two of 'em want to see you." He listened for a moment, then said, "Yessir," hung up the handset, and told Falkner, "The office is at the back, past the restrooms."

Falkner said, "Thank you," and led Tan inside.

The main room was a little sharper than the outside suggested. The walls were matte black. The bar, stage, tables, and chairs had all started life elsewhere, then been painted purple, pink, black, and gray, which either meant the owner was more creative than Tan had expected, or someone had seriously lucked out at a paint sale.

A small crowd of men sat at the borders of the long rectangle of stage, watching a dancer shimmy out of her bikini bottoms. Tan thought, *Huh. I*

have a type now. And it's not that one. Would Padma be pleased if I called her an Indian Betty Page?

The tinsel curtain that led off the stage to the dressing--undressing?--room was framed by a pair of airbrushed cartoon rabbit women, like the one on the sign outside but without the bikini, all wink and red lips and a cottontail that looked like a ski cap pom-pom. Above, two-color script along a flying curve shouted, "This place is HOPPIN'!"

In the low light at the edges of the room, other women drank with customers. Tan saw them as flickers of reflected light: a sequin here, some glitter, the glint of an eye or a strap buckle. As his vision adjusted he realized the women, while seeming to focus on their customers, were watching Falkner and him. Because they were a novelty? Or because they might be a threat? And if the latter, what were they afraid of?

A small man waited for them at the end of the hall. He wore black trousers and the Road Rabbits T-shirt, and his hair was dyed dark purple. Tan couldn't decide if his thick-lensed glasses were too conservative or too hipster. "I'm Jack Wendt," he half-shouted over the whomp-whomp of the music. "What can I help you with?"

Falkner showed her credentials again. "Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner, FBI. This is Special Agent Arthur Tan."

Tan inclined his head, said, "Sir," then wondered why he had begun to imitate Brady. But then, who did the strong backup role better than Brady? Tan was the new kid. Copying was how newbies learned.

"Do you have an office where we can talk?"

Wendt frowned for an instant behind his glasses. "Sure, sure. This way." He pushed open the door behind him, painted black and marked "No admittance," and waved them in.

The furniture here was secondhand, too, but the walls were gray. Wendt sat down behind a scarred steel desk and waved Falkner and Tan to a pair of molded plastic chairs on metal legs. They were almost as uncomfortable as Tan had expected.

Falkner said, "We'd like to ask a few questions about Rydel Pope."

Wendt's eyes narrowed. "Rydel? The FBI? Even Rydel didn't think he was that big a noise. What was he into that the FBI cares about?"

"We're looking into his death."

"I heard he got bit by a spider. Found him on the bathroom floor." Wendt grinned suddenly, and Tan wished Baumgartner hadn't mentioned Batman

villains, because Wendt could have been one, for just that instant. "Damn, did somebody dose him? Was he murdered by drug dealers or something?"

Falkner said, with the straight face that strangers interpreted as humorless, "We haven't established the source of the toxin."

Wendt nodded. "He was a bad boy years ago, I guess, but I never heard he used the stuff he sold. No, he was solid. A guy you could trust. I used to give him the bank deposits, even."

Tan asked the official next question. "Did he have any enemies? Did he quarrel with anyone? Maybe have trouble with a customer?"

"Nothing that lasted after the guy sobered up. No, everybody liked Rydel."

"What about the other employees?"

"Sure. What, the girls? Oh, the girls loved him. Rydel always looked out for 'em. The bouncer's a dancer's best friend." Wendt leaned back in his desk chair, as if this speech was a La-Z-Boy and he was settling in. "We're family here, agents. Some people find that hard to believe. They watch those shows on cable where it's all sleaze and mob bosses and girls shooting up, but we all show up for work every day. We share pictures of our kids. We look out for each other. It's a good place to work, and we try to keep it that way."

Falkner said, "Rydel wasn't married, and didn't have children. Was he dating anyone?"

Wendt turned his head to one side, then shook it slowly. "I never saw him with anybody. But he was here to do a job, you know? Professional."

So family didn't extend past the parking lot. "Might one of the bartenders or the dancers know?"

"No, probably not."

Tan fielded a significant glance from Falkner. For whatever reason, Wendt wanted to control the information. "We'll need to interview your staff. We'll do our best not to interrupt your routine, of course. Can we use this room, or is there somewhere else you'd prefer?"

Under the clown-wig purple hair, Wendt's face was stiff, pouting in spite of his fixed-looking smile. "Sure. Sure, right here is fine." Wendt sprang out of his chair. "I'll let everybody know you want to see them."

"No, thanks," Falkner said, bringing the words out bright and crisp like the crack of a bat. "We'll take care of that."

Tan wondered if Wendt was actually starting to sweat. He said, "We prefer to handle these things ourselves. You never know where a lead may come from."

Especially if no one tells them what to say before they talk to us.

He followed Falkner back down the hall, wondering how this would work. Start with the bartender? Ask one of the women to gather the others? They stepped into the main room and the full throb of the music, and Tan nearly ran into his suddenly stationary boss.

"The dancer," Falkner said, just loud enough to reach him.

The skinny dancer was still on stage. In a display of surprising strength and agility, she was hanging upside down on the pole, her thighs closed around it, her hands clenched on it as if she could strangle it, pushing herself up toward the lights and sliding slowly back down, rising and falling to the beat of the music. Her blonde ponytail swept the floor; her skin shone with sweat.

Etched on the ridged and knotted muscles of her back across their full width was a tattoo of a black widow spider.

The music ended, and the dancer peeled off the pole in a slow-motion somersault. She swept up a clutter of one- and five-dollar bills from the edge of the stage, hooked the parts of her bikini off the floor with her other hand, and strode, high-heeled and haughty, through the tinsel curtain.

"I refuse to believe," Tan said, after he got his breath back, "it can be this easy."

"Hang onto your doubts, agent, but if the solution falls off the tree into our hands, I'm not going to glue it back on the branch."

They'd come out of the hallway at the end of the bar, almost in front of the server's station. Tan waved the bartender over.

"What can I get you?"

"Tell me about the dancer."

The next woman's music started, and the bartender had to shout. "She'll be out in a couple minutes, and you can buy her a drink."

"No, thanks." He flashed his shield, which made the bartender literally step back a pace. "Don't worry, we're just after background info. Has she worked here long?"

"Spider? Couple years, I guess. I couldn't tell you exactly."

"She's...got an unusual build for a stripper."

The bartender snorted. "You could say that. She got better tips when she had some weight on her. I don't know what the fuck she's on."

"You think she's using?"

The bartender remembered he was talking to a law enforcement officer. "I didn't say that. If she is, she don't bring it here. Jack gets along fine with the cops, and he wants to keep it that way."

"Maybe she's sick."

The bartender shrugged, and Tan knew he wasn't going to commit himself to any more speculating. "She could do better someplace else, maybe. Chicago might have guys who go for her type. But we get truckers, farmers, guys from the Hormel plant. You know, all-American guys, want a nice rack and a big smile." He wiped the dry bar top vigorously. *Busy man, work to do.* "Anything else?"

"No, thanks." Tan turned to see Falkner walking into the room, charting a path to intersect with the dancer with the spider tattoo who, bikini back on and makeup freshened, was winding slowly between the tables, trolling for an offer to buy her a drink. At least, Tan thought that was what she was supposed to be doing. But her chin was lifted and her gaze skimmed the top of every head in the room, and she was definitely not smiling.

He hurried to catch up to his boss before she had to bring their first suspect into the back room all by herself.

He caught the last words of Falkner's standard introduction: "--gent Arthur Tan. May we ask you a few questions?"

"Sure," the dancer called Spider replied, smiling widely with her lips only. "The answers are no, I don't remember, and they must be mistaken. Put them anywhere you like."

"This isn't about you," Falkner said. "It's about Rydel Pope."

"Has he risen from the dead?"

"Not so far as we know."

"Then who gives a fuck about him?"

"That would be easier to answer in the office."

Tan followed Spider's gaze from the Viking bouncer near the front door, who held up his hands in a gesture of complete cluelessness, to Wendt at the bar, who might have just jerked his head in a tight "no."

Spider said, "Sure, I'd love to talk about anything you want. Jack's office, you say?" She turned on a heel and led them back. Tan tried to decide if the tattoo was beautiful or creepy and decided both applied. Was she gamma thin? Druggie thin? Anorexic thin? Would-be model thin? Being thin was hardly

the same as casting no reflection in a mirror.

In the office, Spider claimed Wendt's chair behind the desk, swirled around once, and said, "So why the fuck does anyone care about Rydel Fucking Pope?"

"He may've been murdered," Falkner said quietly.

For a moment, Spider's persona faltered, and something almost like pity showed on her face. Then she said, "Why the fuck would anyone bother to kill a worthless piece of shit like him? The world's full of assholes no better and no worse."

"We were hoping you might have an idea," Tan said.

Spider studied him, and he tried to soften his face. *Time to play Chaz, not Brady. She's used to being tough at work.*

Falkner said, "It's possible he wasn't the only one. Do you recognize Jean Marie Fernandez's name?"

If Spider was acting, her timing was perfect. She thought for a moment, then said, "No."

"Or Louis Kirkland?"

Again, the pause, and then-- "Looney Lou! He was hilarious!"

"You knew him?"

"Just from TV. Why would anyone kill him?"

"We don't know that anyone killed any of them, yet. Getting back to Rydel Pope, why were you pleased he was dead?"

"You mean, did I kill him?"

Falkner clasped her hands in her lap and studied them. Then she shocked the daylights out of Tan. She raised her eyes to Spider's heavily painted face and smiled like a co-conspirator. "Have you ever wondered why cops do that on television, *ask* someone if they committed murder? Do they really expect the answer to be 'Yes'?"

Spider forgot to look hard in her confusion, and Tan revised his estimate of her age downward. "I don't know. I guess people confess sometimes."

"If they did it very often, I could spend more time home with my kids."

"You have kids?" Spider asked, as if Falkner had said, "I breed Martians."

"Two girls."

Tan waited, as Falkner did, for a confidence in return, but Spider's confusion didn't go that deep. She sat silent, staring at a bare spot on the desk.

"You must be cold," Falkner said, and shrugged out of her suit jacket.

"Huh. You really are a mom." The sarcasm was back in Spider's voice, but not the hostility. But when Falkner moved to drape the jacket around Spider's shoulders, the woman held her off with one hand. "Glitter," she said, and pointed to the sheen that highlighted her protruding cheekbones, her knobby shoulders, and the tops of her meager breasts.

"Don't worry. It's seen worse." Falkner handed Spider the jacket. After a moment, she tugged it around her.

"Now, let's start from the top. Spider isn't your legal name, is it?"

"Anna Krol. Two Ns, one L. Age? Address? Driver's license number?"

"Maybe later. Now, why did you dislike Rydel Pope?"

"Because he was a thug, and he was okay with that." Her expression was sharp as a knife edge as she jerked her head toward the door. "Ask any of the girls. They'll say the same."

Tan said, "According to your boss, a bouncer is the dancer's best friend."

"You see Jack out there wiggling his bare ass? Then assume he's full of crap about a dancer's best friend."

"Did Pope...physically intimidate the women here?"

"You mean hit us, or rape us? Oh, hell, no. If Rydel damaged the money factory, Jack would have put his fat ass on the street. No, Rydel was Jack's tax collector." She said the last two words as if they tasted too bad to keep in her mouth for long.

"I beg your pardon?" Falkner asked.

Anna Krol turned to Falkner with something like relief. *She's wanted to say this for a long time,* Tan thought. *Finally, someone wants to hear it.* "Jack takes ten percent of our tips for-- He calls it an emergency fund. We all kick in so any girl who gets in the shit will be able to count on some help. But Jack never pays it out. He won't even say how much money there is."

Tan asked, "Can't you refuse to pay in?"

Anna rolled her eyes at him.

It was Falkner who answered. "If she does, she's seen as refusing to support the other women. Because the money *might* be there, and Wendt *might* pay it

out. Hope can forge a hell of a chain."

"But if all the dancers refused to pay in--"

"I was working on 'em. Somebody must have told Jack. Rydel started waiting for me every time I came off stage. I had to hand over my tips while the other girls watched. Not like I had a place to hide anything, right?" Anna flipped Falkner's jacket aside to flash her bikini. "Rydel would count my money and take Jack's cut." Anna smiled savagely. "He always rounded up."

The words "You could have quit" almost made it out Tan's mouth. He was proud of himself for swallowing them. "It sounds like you had a case for embezzlement. Did you report Wendt or Pope to the police?"

He couldn't figure out the expression on Anna's face when she stared at him, then dropped her gaze to the desktop again. "People say, 'Oh, call the cops, they'll help.' I grew up here. The guys in that black-and-white? They're the same guys who drove around in their fucking muscle cars in high school and yelled 'bitch' and 'lesbo' at me out the windows. The exact same guys." She met Tan's eyes again, and the hard resentment she'd worn when she came into the office was back and then some. "So no, I probably wouldn't call the cops."

Falkner stood up. "Agent Tan will take down your information, Ms. Krol. We may need to talk to you again--"

Anna rose from the desk chair, leaving Falkner's jacket behind. "So don't leave town. Just like on TV."

Even Falkner had fallen from grace, it seemed. Tan entered Anna Krol's data on his phone and escorted her into the hall. As she sauntered out into the main room of the bar, Tan realized what that indecipherable expression had been. Surprise into despair into disillusionment. Hope forged chains even when you tried not to hope.

*

Falkner and Tan interviewed five dancers, two bartenders, and two bouncers. They all said the same thing: Anna Krol was a troublemaker. She was trying to organize the women, who didn't want to change anything. She threatened them if they didn't join her (though only one woman cited an actual threat: Krol would tell the woman's boyfriend she'd slept with someone else). She was trying to squeeze more money out of Wendt, who was always nice to her. And Rydel Pope was without question a dancer's best friend.

Falkner sipped coffee from the Styrofoam cup Lau had set before her on the table of their makeshift war room at the county sheriff's office. It tasted almost as bad as she'd expected.

"So Wendt got them coached after all," Lau said.

"We might have believed it if they hadn't all said the same thing." Tan swallowed from his cup and made a face.

Outside in the hall there was a low-level furor of thumping and rustling before the door opened on Chaz, his hands and arms full of bags. "Oh, good, you're back. I've got dinner and information." He handed a plastic bag to Tan. "Wash these out, will you?"

Tan opened the bag. "Mugs."

"Dollar store. Styrofoam plus hot liquid equals poison." He handed another bag to Lau. "Real coffee and snacks. I don't know how we'll keep the milk, though."

"There's got to be a fridge in this building somewhere," Lau said, and snagged the bag.

"Aaaand," Chaz announced, holding out the bulging paper sack he'd carried in the crook of his elbow, "Indian food. Certified kosher--I asked."

Falkner inhaled the fragrances of rice, garlic naan, and dal makhani. "You're a mighty hunter."

They cleared the table and covered it with containers of food, then ate dinner while Lau and Villette shared what they'd learned.

"Jean Marie Fernandez may have been the best clerk in the county assessor's office at one time." Chaz interrupted himself with a forkful of chickpeas, but didn't let it stop him for long. "But six months ago her supervisor fired a warning shot over her head. She got involved in her sister's divorce and custody battle and let her work slide. The capper was when her boss found what looked like a week's worth of incoming paperwork stuffed in the bottom of a drawer, including several checks for property tax payments still in their unopened envelopes. There was definitely a span of time when she may have pissed someone off."

"What do we know about Kirkland?" Falkner asked Lau.

"Well, the first thing you should know is, I've now watched some of his ads on YouTube, and if he weren't already dead *I'd* kill him."

"He did his own commercials?" asked Tan.

"With all the painful that implies. However, his hardware and lumber stores were showing some growth even in a bad economy. He was going ahead on a fifth location at the time of his death."

Falkner nodded. "People fix up instead of buying, and do their own repairs. No Australia trips for either Kirkland or Fernandez, I take it?"

"As close as they got," Chaz said, balancing a forkful of rice and dal, "was the Outback Steakhouse."

Falkner's cell phone began playing Tommy Shaw's "Girls With Guns," so she answered it with, "Hafidha. You're on speaker. How goes the data mining?"

Hafidha's phone voice mixed boredom, amusement, and respect with a tiny dash of contempt. The first time Falkner noticed that, she was annoyed for about thirty seconds. Then she realized Hafidha's contempt was for herself, and now she listened for it, to gauge whether this was a good day or bad. Today seemed to be good.

Hafidha said, "No diamonds, but the ore is shiny. Potential victim numero uno, Professor Jon Jablonski, had a rep for providing after-hours counseling to young female students, which did not amuse Mrs. Jablonski. Whether she made sure his last affair was with one of his spiders, I can't guess, but the electronic record suggests she wanted him to clean up his act rather than close the show. Now, here's everyone's cue to lean closer."

"Leaning," Falkner said dryly, because Lau, Tan, and Villette already had.

"A dozen spider eggs went missing from Jablonski's lab around the time of his death. I'm compiling the list of professors, staff, and students who had key cards for the lab."

"Eureka," said Chaz.

"But we still don't know where the eggs ended up. Hafs," Lau asked, "any links between Jablonski and--"

"Our other dead people? Not online. From the Jablonskis' credit card records, they never so much as bought gas on the interstate in Janesville. And the Jablonski property is in Madison, which is Dane County, so no contact with the assessor's office in Rock County."

"Any social connections among the victims?" Tan asked hopefully.

"The ones who lived in Janesville might have been in the same place at the same time now and then, but not the way you mean. I've got one hit connecting all three of them, besides the fact they lived in the land of cheeseheads: sometimes they bought Girl Scout cookies. But they got them from different troops, and they liked different varieties--as in, they came from different bakers. So I, at least, plan to keep eating Tagalongs without looking in the box first."

"Praise Jesus," Chaz said.

Falkner winced. "Speaking as the mother of daughters, the image that conjures makes me uncomfortable. Hafidha, did you turn up anything on

Anna Krol's background?"

"With disturbing ease, Fearless Leader. And I'd say she makes my spider-sense tingle, but this is maybe not the time or place."

Everyone around the table knew what that meant. Trauma. Trigger. Crack. "Give," Chaz ordered.

"Anna Krol, daughter of Christopher and Thea Krol of Janesville, older sister of Erika. Christopher died in a car wreck when Anna was eight and Erika was five. Her mom went from housewife to working mom, raising two kids on a waitress's pay. On and off food stamps, a car repo, landlord troubles-- There is hardship and woe in this tale, no shit."

Falkner heard the anger that Hafidha's offhand tone couldn't quite hide. "So, childhood loss, and subsequent stress."

"And that's so not all. Thea Krol remarried in 2004, one Aidan Hewell of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Construction worker, good salary. But that's when Anna goes from being a well-behaved B student to what they used to call a juvenile delinquent. Dropped out of high school, got busted for prostitution in Minneapolis. Turned up in kink films in San Francisco, plus another arrest for punching a cop who was putting her boyfriend in the back of a squad car."

"Never a good idea," Tan said, poker-faced.

"We are reaching a crescendo, my darlings," Hafidha said, and Falkner could imagine her leaning back in her chair directing an imaginary orchestra with a crochet hook. "Two years ago, Mama Krol dies--heart attack. Anna returns to what's left of the bosom of her family for the funeral. Three nights later, stepdad Aidan Hewell is killed in what appears to be a break-in at the family home."

All was silence around the folding table in the sheriff's office. "Cause of death?" Lau asked finally.

"Blunt-force trauma to the head. Many blunt forces. Because of the number of blows, and Hewell's long-standing friendship with people who move stolen stuff for a living, local police believe he pissed off the wrong dude."

Chaz got to it first. "Believe? They don't know who killed him?"

"Unsolved. The daughters alibied out--a friend down the street, Lorayna Brobich, said they were staying with her that night. But they were never seriously suspected."

"You want me to ask 'Why not,' don't you?"

"Of course I do, baby bro. Aidan Hewell was a skinny bastard, but friends and

coworkers testified that he was very, very strong." Falkner could hear the inferences in the way Hafidha's voice went silky and smiling. "And even if he was blitzed, the blows that killed him had some muscle behind them. Neither of the Krol sisters looked as if they could open a tough jar of pickles."

"'Looked' being the crucial word," Lau mused.

"And maybe they couldn't." Falkner knew it flew in the face of good sense, but she didn't like to think of Anna Krol, with her mask of disdain, her defensiveness, and her fierce foul-mouthed intelligence, bludgeoning a man to death.

"What happened to the younger sister?" asked Lau.

"Nothing, as far as I can tell. No police record, no fuss, nada. Hewell adopted her shortly after he married her mother. She still lives in Janesville, in the house Hewell bought for the family when he married Mama. I'm e-mailing the address."

"Thanks, Hafidha," Falkner said, and disconnected. "Finish eating and pop your breath mints, agents. After dinner is a good time to find our witnesses at home."

Act III

Lorayna Brobich was a round woman, round on round. Her smooth, glowing cheeks were half-spheres; her chin was a jutting dome; her breasts and backside were generous near-globes. In the yellow glare of the bug light in her front porch fixture, she looked grayish. *One more reason to take the bug light out for the winter,* Lau thought.

"FBI?" Brobich repeated, skeptical. "Terrorists or serial killers?"

"Excuse me?" Chaz asked.

"Well, that's what you folks chase, right? And this house isn't no way big enough for both, so which are you after?"

Chaz still looked wary. But Lau felt a wholly inappropriate giggle working its way up her throat. "Ma'am, you'd be amazed how many terrorists can fit under a bed."

"Now, see there? Eternal vigilance, that's what I'm talking about." Brobich still hadn't smiled, but Lau thought she saw one in the lines around her eyes. "What *can* I do for you?"

"We're investigating an unsolved case, and we think you might be able to help us."

And like that, the suggested smile was gone. "I'd invite you in, but I just put my little boy down for the night. He wakes easy. How about we talk tomorrow?"

"We'd prefer now, Ms. Brobich." Chaz drew himself up a smidge, and even though Brobich was three Chazes wide, she leaned back a little. "There may be lives at risk."

"All right," Brobich said. "Don't mind the mess." She stepped aside to let them pass.

It was reasonable mess: a toddler's toys on the furniture and wall-to-wall carpet, magazines heaped on the couch, dishes from dinner still on the table in the dining alcove. Brobich swept a few action figures off two upholstered living room chairs and claimed the sofa for herself.

Under the circumstances, they'd probably earn more goodwill by getting straight to the point. "Ms. Brobich," Lau began, "You lived down the street from the Hewells at the time of Thea Hewell's death, correct?"

"It was my mama's house. I lived there until I got it sold back in April, when I moved here. Didn't get what it was worth. That street's gone to hell. Everybody's selling out."

"Did you know the Hewells well?"

Brobich fixed Lau with a long, considering look. "Are you working your way up to asking if Anna and Erika were with me when it happened? Because I think I already said so to the police."

"No, ma'am." It was Chaz who answered, sounding almost like an apology. "We really do want to know about the family."

"We're not here to investigate Aidan Hewell's murder," Lau added, trying her best to sound like Falkner at her most austere. Because it wasn't going to help if Brobich asked what they *were* here to investigate.

Brobich studied Chaz, then Lau. "Anna and I were best friends when we were kids. Same age, same school. Hell, our Barbies traded clothes even if we didn't. We were in and outta each other's kitchens up into high school, so yeah, I knew her family pretty well. We let Erika hang with us sometimes even if she was younger. And Anna's mama always had cookies and shit for us, even though they were poor as dirt."

"What happened when Mrs. Krol remarried?" asked Chaz.

"Well, *I* was happy--he bought 'em that house right down the street from my mama's. When we were little, me and Anna would talk about how we'd grow up and have babies, and our babies would grow up and they'd get married to

each other, and we'd all live next door. Now we were next door, near as anything."

"But Anna wasn't happy."

Brobich scowled at the memory. "She wouldn't tell me why. We told each other everything, but now she was keeping secrets. We had a big damn fight about it. We made up, but I knew it wasn't all cool with us."

Lau hitched forward a little on her chair. "Did you know Aidan Hewell before he married Mrs. Krol?"

"I'd seen him over their place, but that was about all."

"Then Anna left home?"

"It was a little noisier than that, but yeah."

"Noisy?" Chaz thrust his head out on his long neck, like a microphone on a boom.

Brobich shook her head, and Lau thought regret threaded her voice when she said, "Anna and Mr. Hewell had yelling, breaking-shit fights every couple-few days. Sometimes outside in the yard. Man, they *hated* each other. I'll say this, though: that man never hit Anna, not even a slap. But yeah, she ran off." Brobich looked away, and Lau wondered if she was facing toward her old house and the past. "She didn't even tell me good-bye. I didn't see her again till her mama's funeral."

"But you still lived down the street from the Hewells."

"Yeah."

"Did you see much of them?"

"Oh, yeah. Mr. Hewell was always around, shoveling sidewalks for the old folks or mowing their lawns or offering to take shit to the dump for people in his truck. He was a scrawny little fart, but when you needed to move a sofa, he'd be there. My mama thought he was just sweet."

"What did *you* think?"

She was about to give the pat answer, but Lau saw her shelve it and start over. "My girl hated him, you know? And Anna could get all up in her head about some shit, but I didn't think she'd hate like that for no reason. And then my Uncle Bee came by when Mr. Hewell was helping Mama fix the fence gate, and after he left Uncle Bee said we should stay clear of him."

"Why?" Lau asked.

"Uncle Bee said he had some badass friends. Then Mama said right back at him that so did Uncle Bee, and he dropped it. But after that I didn't go in their house."

"What did Erika think of Hewell?"

"Me and her were never close, so I don't know. But I know he thought Erika walked on water. He gave her presents, drove her anywhere she wanted, talked her up to anyone who'd stand still long enough. 'My girl won that prize in school,' he'd say, or 'My girl sings like an angel.' I guess she was his girl, since he adopted her. She got a scholarship to UW, got it when she was just a junior, free ride, and you should have heard him. Like she was smart because of anything he did." Brobich snorted.

Lau tried to watch Brobich closely without seeming to. "A few years later Mr. Hewell was murdered. Were Anna and Erika upset?"

"They didn't know right away, of course, because they were over to my house visiting with me all night. But sure, they were upset. I mean, guy gets beat all to shit in your house? Doesn't matter if you hated him, that's awful."

Lau exchanged a quick, speaking look with Chaz, and they both rose. "Thank you very much, Ms. Brobich," said Chaz. "May we call you if we have more questions?"

"What am I gonna do to stop you? No, go ahead. I don't know what else I can tell you, though."

As they walked away from the house toward the car, Chaz said, "I have two questions. Not for Brobich, though."

"Bet I can guess the first one. Do we think Aidan Hewell was a jammer?"

"We'll never know for sure, but it sounds suspicious, doesn't it?"

"Second question?"

"It's looking pretty certain that there is an actual spider, or spiders, poisoning people. And it can't be random escaped spiders, because they'd *behave* like spiders, and probably even be spotted in the homes of the victims. So the person we're looking for has some way of remotely controlling the spiders after releasing them. Lets 'em go, gets them to bite the target, brings them back. Are we looking at mind-controlled spiders?"

Lau walked around the rental to the driver's side door. "Oh my God, I hate you right now," she said, and unlocked the car.

*

"Seven," Tan said as he and Falkner drove toward the Hewell home.

"The movie?"

"Sorry. Inflatable Santas in one yard. Did I miss a Christmas movie where Santa gets cloned?" Falkner was driving, so Tan had been able to indulge in decoration-gawking. He wondered if the amount of outdoor Christmas lighting made Janesville visible from space. "And what's with the penguins? Does Santa have a summer place at the South Pole?"

Falkner hunched one shoulder, her eyes on the road. "Don't ask me. I was in high school before I realized flying deer aren't in the Christian bible."

"Padma thinks he's the modern incarnation of the Holy Spirit, so she's very pro-Santa. But at her church-- Oops."

"So you *don't* have an excuse to skip the Christmas party."

The Hewell home was close to the end of its block, next to a vacant store that had probably been built as a mini-mart. Christmas had avoided the area. From the street, the 1950s rambler simply looked quiet, but as they walked up to the front door, Tan noticed flaking paint on the trim and a gutter spout hanging awkward as a broken arm.

A young woman opened the front door and left its glass storm door fastened. She seemed smaller than Anna Krol in every way, short and narrow-shouldered, but the family resemblance was unmistakable if you looked for it. Her jeans were baggy and her sweater was large, which did not necessarily mean anything--in a Wisconsin winter, revealing clothes were for people whose concept of cool was too literal for Tan's taste. She wore no makeup, and her lank beige hair was pulled back in a ponytail in an artless way too severe for artifice. Her little triangular face, exposed, belonged on a fairy in a cage.

Falkner said, "Erika Hewell?"

"Yes?" She stayed behind the glass, watching Tan, and asked him, "What do you want?"

He glanced at Falkner, who held out her ID. He did the same as she said, "Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner, FBI. This is Special Agent Arthur Tan. We'd like to ask you a few questions. Do you mind if we come in?"

"What? No." Unlocking the storm door, she asked Tan, "Did something happen to Anna?"

"Your sister's fine," Falkner said. Erika looked at her, then at Tan, and he nodded. Falkner added, "We saw her earlier this evening. But we think you can help us with an inquiry. This should only take a few minutes."

"Well, okay, I guess," Erika replied, and led them inside.

The interior was much like the exterior: a middle-class home that was lived in, but not loved. After the crackling cold of the December night, the room felt heavy with warmth and moisture. The house plants seemed happy about it; they filled the front picture window, and anyplace else in the living room that might get a little light. The building seemed older than it was, and at last Tan realized why: it smelled like age.

"Do you want coffee?" Erika asked Tan. "Or I could make tea. I'm pretty sure I have some. Sit down if you like."

Falkner said, "Thank you, but we shouldn't take the time." She held out her phone and asked, "Do you recognize this man?"

Erika stepped closer to peer at a photo of Rydel Pope. "No." After a moment she looked up from the phone, into Falkner's face, then over to Tan's. "He looks like kind of a jerk, doesn't he?"

Tan wondered if he was supposed to answer that. But Falkner turned to him as well, waiting. So he said, "It's hard to tell from a photo. He died recently."

"He worked with your sister," Falkner said.

"I don't go there. I mean, why would I?"

Again, Tan had the feeling he was supposed to reply. "They probably water the drinks."

Erika grinned, blushing, and skated her eyes down to the floor.

Falkner clicked her phone. "What about this one?"

Erika looked again, squinted, then said, "Loony Lou Kirkland. Ugh."

"Did you ever meet him?"

Erika turned beseechingly to Tan. Tan said, "If there's something we should know--"

"Not in person." She shook her head, as if verbal negation wasn't enough to dismiss Lou Kirkland. "I always changed the channel when his ads came on."

"You seem to dislike him more than I'd expect for a guy you could get rid of with the TV remote."

She looked around the room as if hoping for rescue from the house plants. Finally she said, "A while ago I got a letter from a lawyer wanting to buy my home. I called the number to tell them no, and the woman who answered said it was Kirkland Lumber. I thought maybe I'd called the wrong number, but no, it was a lawyer working for them, and she put me through. He kept saying the property wasn't worth much, and this was a really good offer because they

owned all the land around mine and I wouldn't be able to sell this little bit to someone else. But I didn't want to sell it to *anyone*. Then he said he'd ask Mr. Kirkland if he could go higher, and I just-- I hung up."

"When was this?" Falkner asked.

"July, I think. Yes, it was."

The month before Kirkland died. "Did you ever hear from them again?"

"There was another letter a week later. Louis Kirkland signed it. It was a lot like the phone call, except... He wrote as if he knew me. As if we were friends." A little shiver passed across her shoulders. "I tore it up and threw it out."

"Did you tell anyone about the offer?" Tan asked her.

"My sister, Anna. The house belongs to me, but she's family. You know?" She looked hopefully up at Tan, as if she wasn't used to people understanding the concept, and expected better from him. "And I was really upset. Anna said they couldn't force me to sell, but it's not like she's an expert."

Falkner said, "One more photo, Ms. Hewell, and then we'll be going." She brought up a photo of Jean Marie Fernandez.

Erika stared at it without expression. "No."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure I didn't know her."

"Jean Marie Fernandez. She worked at the Rock County assessor's office."

"I've never been to the courthouse."

Falkner nodded, put away her phone, then said, "You used the past tense when speaking of Fernandez. 'Didn't know,' not--"

A sudden flash of amused superiority crossed Erika's features. "The other two were dead, weren't they? Duh!" Then she looked to Tan, and something like shyness returned.

*

They gathered in the empty breakfast room of their hotel, around the corner from the front desk and the night outside the front doors. In the morning the counters along the walls would be full of too-soft bagels and too-sweet muffins, pre-measured cups of bland waffle batter and a self-serve waffle iron. Now it was cool and bare as a hospital morgue, and lit with a single strip of fluorescents overhead to save energy in the off hours.

Falkner listened to Tan summing up what they'd learned at the Hewell house. He did good work. Where could she get three more of him?

"She mostly paid attention to you?" Chaz asked, frowning. He'd brought a jar of peanut butter and a box of graham crackers from the groceries they'd left at the sheriff's office, and had been determinedly wielding a plastic knife since they'd settled in to share information. He tossed the wrapper from the first stack of crackers as she watched.

"Creepily much. Young woman, alone in her house with two strangers-- I would have expected her to distance herself from the male of the pair."

Chaz bolted another cracker, tried to talk around it, and was defeated by peanut butter. His teammates waited until he swallowed. "Did she defer to you and *not* Falkner? I mean--"

"Yes," Falkner said. "We established at the front door that I was in charge, but she kept ignoring me and looking to Tan for cues and validation. She answered his questions in preference to mine."

Lau opened her mouth and closed it again. Chaz raised his eyebrows and nodded to her.

"It's sometimes a pattern of behavior," Lau said slowly. "In abused children."

Tan rocked back in his chair. "You mean she was abused by her mother?"

Lau shook her head. But it was Chaz who said, "The male abuser may treat the child like a love object. He earns his or her trust and affection. The abuser makes the child feel special. Meanwhile, the child sees the mother can't protect her, or doesn't notice what's going on. She learns to see women as insignificant."

Tan turned to Falkner, as if he hoped she'd tell him something different. But all she could say was, "That sounds about right."

"It fits what we learned from Brobich about the relationship between Hewell and his stepdaughter," Lau said.

"So," Tan said on an outward rush of breath, "the Hewell-Krol household was one big nasty pot of awful, to use the technical term."

"I think I'm too tired to figure out what we're looking at," Lau sighed. "It's turning into a football play diagram in my head."

"Circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one," Tan drawled in someone else's voice. It was an instant before Falkner realized it was from *Alice's Restaurant*. That told her how tired *she* was.

"Pack it in," she ordered. "We'll start over first thing in the morning."

"Want me to call the office?" Lau asked.

"I'll do it." And Ben, too, of course, and the girls if they were still up. No, it would be almost midnight at home. "Good night, all."

She dialed Brady's cell as she walked down the corridor to her room. He picked up on the first ring. "We're in for the night," she told him.

"Good. Hafs has the data from the interviews with Brobich and Erika Hewell, so we're up to speed here."

Falkner made end-of-phone-call noises and disconnected. Inside her room she sat down heavily on the end of the bed and called Ben. All fine, give my love to the girls, I miss you, I don't know when I'll be home but I wish it could be right now. Right now.

Anna and Erika Krol, three years apart in age, separated and trying to survive a world that wanted to mash them flat. Why weren't they living together? If she and Ben died after the girls were of age, would Bekk and Deborah live together in the house in Silver Spring? They'd have to make the mortgage payments, and pay the property taxes.

Property taxes. Had Erika Hewell paid the property taxes on the family home, or had Anna? Had there been a check in Jean Marie Fernandez's desk drawer with one of their names on it? Lou Kirkland had made an offer on the Hewell house. Kirkland Lumber was planning a new location. A thriving business in an economic slump. A county employee whose sister was fighting an expensive custody battle. Follow the money. Could it be that straightforward?

She was staggering-tired, but she pulled out her laptop and made notes. *Please, God, don't let someone else die from a spider bite tonight. This has to wait until tomorrow.*

Finally she crawled between the sheets and turned off the bedside light. She was sliding into sleep, her subconscious already constructing towers of irrational images, when she heard a noise.

She was fully awake in an instant. Awake, she couldn't describe it. A brush against something? A rattle? A scrape? She lay motionless, listening past the sound of traffic from the interstate, the hum of the heater, her own breathing. Direction--where had it come from? Down or up? Should she move?

She shifted slowly, slowly, onto her side, reached, and turned on the bedside light.

She was the only living thing in the room.

Still, she got up and turned on all the lights, then got the LED flashlight on her key ring and searched all the corners, the undersides of the desk and chair and

nightstands, under the bathroom sink and in the folds of the shower curtain. Finally she turned off the lights, left the flashlight on the bedside table, and got back under the covers.

We better solve this case in a hurry, she thought, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling.

*

"Do you ever sleep?" Brady asked, then had to smother a yawn. He set a cup of coffee within Hafidha's reach, but safely away from the electronics. *This dog's been well-trained,* he thought with an imagined snort.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead." Hafidha reached for the coffee without looking.

"No, seriously. I'm here for you, but midnight's circling the drain."

"Thrill of the hunt. It keeps me awake." She slurped coffee, then seemed to remember that Brady was an actual human actually in the same room and not a chatbot. She turned an apologetic smile on him. "Also, I've learned some stuff since the Bug ate my brain. I take five-minute micro-naps to get my edge back."

It made Brady a little nervous, the idea of the anomaly having once called the shots of Hafidha's consciousness. Sometimes it still did, he supposed. But he'd watched her wrestle the evil angel and pin it. It might follow her around all day every day demanding a rematch, but Brady thought she could still make it tap out. At least if she couldn't, someone could give her a hand.

"Besides," she added, "you weren't going home until they called in, so why should I?"

Well, hell, *somebody* had to be at the end of the column, to watch their backs, to cover a retreat. He figured this was the remote version.

"Oh," Hafidha said. Her voice was small and clear, the kind of delivery that would carry to the cheap seats but come off as a whisper.

"What? What is it?"

"I have a-- I've got-- Okay, wait, wait. Let me get it all. It's too fast right now..."

Brady hadn't the faintest idea what she meant. But she sat upright and rigid in her desk chair, and her displays flung images and information like confetti bombs, too much for Brady to parse.

And that wasn't his job, was it? *Brighten the corner where you are,* he thought, a little sourly, and clenched his temporarily useless hands between his knees.

At last she flopped against the chair back and sighed, and her monitors fixed on a set of pages layered like a stack of pancakes. "Oh, I am good," she breathed. "Not that this was impossible, but still."

"So make a guy happy and share."

She spun the chair once-and-a-half around and stopped facing him. "I blame Wauwatosa, for having such an awesome name that I failed to automatically Google-map it. It's a near suburb of Milwaukee. Who do we know came from Milwaukee?"

"Tim Miner," Brady said promptly, since he'd been reading over the case notes since the team left. "You pretty much itched to hang my ass on a pike after that one."

"That was when you wanted to shoot my little brudder. Now that you only want to shoot *me*, I like you fine."

"For the record, I *refused* to shoot you when, strictly speaking, I was supposed to."

"I know, honey, but I forgive you for that. Enough memory lane shit. I have a story to tell you. The late Aidan Hewell moved to Janesville from Wauwatosa, but he grew up in Milwaukee. Milwaukee's a big city, though, you were going to say."

"I used to live in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, so no."

"Shush. Spoilsport. Also, Aidan Hewell was significantly older than Tim Miner. So probably no direct contact between them. Because that would be silly. And a coincidence."

"I hate to rush you when you're having so goddamn much fun..."

"Oh, for crying out loud." Hafidha somehow managed to tuck her long legs under her without a struggle. "All right. Let's go back in time to 1987, when hair was big and sixteen people died in a train wreck in Maryland, and yes, that second one is significant. Because it happened the day after a Milwaukee bus driver freaked out, took a bus full of kids hostage, killed a couple of them, and drove off I-794 onto the frozen surface of Milwaukee Bay and subsequently through the ice. The train wreck ate it in the news cycle."

On the screen behind Hafidha's head, a page shuffled: a local news video of a bus being lifted out of smashed ice and water.

"You're saying--"

"The bus driver, Samuel Oskol, had been acting erratically for months, according to his family. Erratic included intermittent zone-outs, *compulsive*

eating, and complaining of hearing unexplained noises." Another image popped up on the monitor, a snapshot of a middle-aged man in front of a Christmas tree with what were probably his grandkids. Sunken-eyed, hollow-cheeked, skin loose on his throat. "On his regular route to school one morning, Oskol picked up his last passenger, shut the bus doors, and drove to the lake. He then proceeded to methodically shoot school kids. A jogger heard the screaming and called the cops."

"Jesus," Brady said. Because you never really got used to hearing stories like that.

"He must have been on a coffee break, honey, because Mr. Oskol snuffed six kids before one of the snipers got a clear shot. Even so, Oskol made it back to the driver's seat and drove the bus into the lake."

"Tell me that finally killed him."

"And three more kids. But here's where it really gets good. They never found Oskol's gun. His family insisted he didn't own one. And a few of the surviving kids said they never saw him holding one."

"Well, now."

"Sounds like our kind of psycho." Hafidha stretched in her chair like a satisfied cat. "Now let me point out that at the time in Milwaukee, the school district buses picked up all the kids in an area regardless of grade, so you got a range of ages on any given bus. The driver stopped at the elementary school, the middle school, and the high school, or wherever he was dropping kids off."

"Hewell and Miner were on the bus." Brady felt as if his chair were gently rocking, like a rowboat. "Oskol was a gamma, and Hewell and Miner were there when he lost his shit."

"When he died, in fact. They were among the kids pulled out of the water. Aidan Adolphus Hewell, age fifteen, and Timothy John Miner, age nine."

Their school photos from that year were on Hafidha's monitor. Even at nine, soft-faced and grinning, with his hair combed severely back, Tim Miner resembled his adult self.

Then the pieces fell--really *fell*--into their proper places. "Holy shit," he said.

"You got it, did you?"

"The contagion theory. Hewell and Miner are present when Oskol converts under conditions of, well, everyone-shitting-themselves terror. Miner goes on to convert years later after suffering brain damage. Hewell converts--does he? We don't know, but at the very least he's a carrier. Did he pass it on to Anna

Krol before she left home?" Was it possible the anomaly could be passed on by contact? No, it couldn't be. *If it could, we'd be facing gamma-pocalypse.*

Hafidha was watching him, a fixed gaze that reminded him of an NCO he'd once had. The guy would wait, and stare, until you finally worked out that whatever you were doing, you were doing it wrong. So he went scrambling back through the story, and found--

"Oskol had already converted. When he *died*. Hewell and Miner were there when he died. Anna Krol was there when Aidan Hewell was beaten to death. Wasn't she?"

"It doesn't seem to be the only way to catch the Bug," Hafidha said dryly. "But I believe it worked in my case."

"But she alibied out."

Hafidha smoothed the cloud of her growing-out hair back from her forehead. "Maybe someone should check into that."

*

Stephen Reyes swallowed his bite of cheese and grits before he answered the call. "Falkner," he told the man on the other side of the restaurant table, and thumbed the green button. "Reyes here."

"You don't answer the phone like a retired guy," Falkner said.

"If I weren't retired, I wouldn't be having a leisurely breakfast at Highlands with a celebrity author. Rupert Beale's in town for a signing."

Beale smiled and waved across the table.

"He's waving."

"Put him on speaker, and I'll talk to both of you," Falkner said, in the brisk style that always reminded him of his eighth-grade social studies teacher.

"Good morning, Esther," Beale said. "Where are you?"

"Wisconsin. We have--no, we may have--solid evidence for the contagion theory."

Reyes found he'd swung forward in his half of the booth. For years they'd searched for the nature of the anomaly and how it moved through the human population. It might not be his Grail, but it would be fair to call it his Spear of Destiny. "Tell me."

"Hafidha's e-mailing you documents on a Milwaukee school bus hijacking in '87. The driver was almost certainly a gamma. And Tim Miner and a teenager named Aidan Hewell were on the bus. Hewell was the stepfather of our two

current suspects."

Reyes remembered to breathe. "Hafs found this?"

"Using the Miner case and the geographic connection to our current one."

Reyes whistled. "Tell Hafidha she just delivered Christmas."

"Call and tell her yourself. You're the one with time on your hands. Oh, how's the adoption going?"

"More complicated than you'd expect, given that all the parties agree."

"Same thing I thought when we adopted Deborah. Amber still wants to give her daughter up?"

He wanted to say "Yes" and leave it at that. But Falkner deserved his confidence. "She's...not ready to be a mother. Strangely enough, I seem ready to be a dad."

"In more than name at last. Give Autumn a hug from Aunt Esther."

"Will do. And thanks, Esther."

"The missing link," Beale said, as Reyes disconnected. "Or is it the gamma Typhoid Mary?"

"Neither, exactly. We've been narrowing down the possibilities for how the anomaly spreads. I don't think we'll ever identify a Patient Zero, but this could be very strong evidence for a contagion mechanism, without any blood relationships to confuse the findings. We haven't been able to track back more than one such transmission before."

"And even that, not very often." Beale chased a bite of muffin through the hollandaise with his fork.

Reyes wondered if he was thinking of Chaz and William Villette, or Hope Mitchell and her unknown father. "And if we find the mechanism for transmission, we're that much closer to finding the thing itself."

"The organism. The anomalous superbug."

"If you're trying out sound bites and chapter titles, could you please not do it out loud?"

Beale threw back his well-groomed head and laughed. "No, no, I promised. No outright breaches of confidentiality without official authorization. Besides, if I stopped hinting and started telling, my readers wouldn't love me half as much. I don't want to kill that goose before I have to."

"Good. Let me bridge this awkward moment by showing you my kid's

artwork."

"My God, you really have gone in for fatherhood, haven't you?"

Reyes drew his new Nexus 7 from his coat pocket, opened the photo gallery, and passed it to Beale.

The picture was a drawing in bright crayon. Under a wide blue sky, a small girl in a hat and coat was holding the hand of a man with skin as dark as Reyes'. They stood beside the Martin Luther King, Jr. Monument. The figures were clumsy, but the proportions and perspective were almost perfect.

Reyes said, "She has the fine motor skills of a little kid combined with the observations of an adult. It frustrates her sometimes, but I tell her her hands are playing a game with her. She's amazing. And no, I do not mean as a subject."

Beale said, "You really expect me to believe she's not your dream study?"

"Oh, I'm keeping a journal for the Idlewood staff. But this time, if there's any conflict--any *hint* of conflict--between what she wants to be and what anyone wants to make her, the kid comes first, and the mission can go hang."

"Let me get the check," Beale said, looking for it amid the plates and crumpled napkins.

"No, no. The local guy buys," Reyes answered, pushing aside the coffee carafe. It nudged the Nexus, which lurched, tilted--

Before it was completely off the table, Beale caught it and put it back in front of Reyes, further from the edge this time.

Reyes laughed. "Pretty fast for an old guy."

"We may not be all we used to be, but we're still all that." Beale grinned. "Not that I'd want to go up against someone like Chaz."

"There isn't anyone like Chaz."

Beale studied him for a moment, then pushed the tip of a piece of whole wheat toast through the last of his eggs Benedict. "It's good you got out when you did, Stephen."

"Meaning?"

"You've lost enough. There's only so much a person can risk in a lifetime." Beale pointed at the Nexus and grinned. "Including his fancy-pants tablet with his kid's artwork on it."

Reyes gave a snort of laughter. "The real reason why I'm adopting: not enough terror in my life nowadays. Here, Autumn drew this one of us trick-

or-treating."

Beale laughed. "Nick Fury and the Black Widow. What was that about people trying to make her into something?"

Reyes smiled sheepishly. "She was the one who said I had to shave my head."

*

When they arrived at the county sheriff's office in the morning, Baumgartner met them at the door again. "We've been upgraded," he said with a grin, and led the way back.

What he led them to was obviously the squad room: two long tables, cushioned stacking chairs, a projector, a whiteboard, video gear, another coffee pot, a mini-fridge, and a row of long, narrow windows looking out on the snow-dusted parking lot.

"I'll go get the good coffee," Chaz said, and disappeared down the hall.

Falkner selected one of the looks she usually saved for her daughters and gave it to Baumgartner.

He surveyed the room. "I might have mentioned something about you having a person of interest in the Pope case. Hell, it's not as if it cost the county money."

They settled in, and Falkner brought Baumgartner up to date on the case so far. Everything except the connection with Tim Miner and Samuel Oskol, of course. Her team had consumed that with their breakfast, and the ramifications were the exclusive topic of conversation over the lousy waffles. Falkner hoped briefing Baumgartner would get them focused again on the gamma at hand.

When she finished, Baumgartner slumped back in his chair and chewed his lip. "Sounds like I need an arrest warrant for Anna Krol."

"No," said Chaz.

Baumgartner stared. Lau and Tan also stared, but only the way they might if they were waiting for a Blue Angels flyover.

"Go ahead," Falkner told Chaz.

He flushed. "Right. Sorry. The psychology isn't right. Anna Krol doesn't like men."

"Then why does she work at a titty bar?" Baumgartner said. "And two of our vics were men."

"There are a significant number of lesbians among female sex workers," Lau

told him. "It's a provider and customer relationship, not an affectional one. The gender orientation actually helps maintain that boundary."

"Besides," said Chaz, "I don't mean she doesn't sleep with them. I mean she doesn't *like* them. She was hostile to Tan, but not to Falkner. She feels solidarity with the other dancers. She won't flirt with male customers even if it means she makes less money. And her tattoo is of a black widow."

"Killer spider," said Baumgartner, but he was no longer insisting. He was interested.

"The myth of the black widow spider is that the female kills her mates. That's not actually always true, but it's what people think. The idea is that it's the female that's powerful."

"And with the Sydney funnel-web spider, it's the other way around," Lau broke in. Falkner could see Chaz's idea blooming in her head.

Chaz beamed at her. "In this spider--the only source of the poison that killed Rydel Pope--it's the males that are venomous. The females are no big deal. The males have the power to kill. And we know whoever's using them isn't treating them as disposable, because there hasn't been one left behind to starve or freeze or get squashed with a hammer. They're valued."

"Anna Krol may not value men," Tan said slowly. "But her sister does."

Chaz nodded. "We need to know what happened in that house the night Aidan Hewell was killed."

"Wait, what?" said Baumgartner.

Falkner drew a breath. *Time to explain without explaining.* "That night made both Anna Krol and Erika Hewell what they are now. We have some information not directly relevant to this case that suggests Krol, and probably her sister, were there when Hewell was murdered."

"Pope's death is connected to the Hewell murder." Baumgartner said it less as a question than as something he wanted to roll around on his tongue.

Falkner stood up and stepped to one of the long windows. The sky was showing pale blue through the cloud cover, and the sunlight turned the cornfield stubble into dull gold. "Send a marked car to pick up Brobich, and put her in an interview room," Falkner said. "I want her to know we're serious."

Act IV

"Ms. Brobich," Falkner said gently, "tell me what happened when Anna Krol

and Erika Hewell came to your door the night Aidan Hewell was killed."

Falkner preferred to do this interview alone, though Chaz and Detective Baumgartner were watching through the glass.

The woman kept her hands under the table. "I hadn't hung with Anna for years, so, you know. We got a pizza, I think. Talked a whole lot, watched some chick movies."

"Which ones?"

"Hell, I don't know." Her voice was cheerful, hearty. "It was like a grown-up sleepover. Just old times shit."

Falkner folded her arms on the table and leaned forward. "Ms. Brobich, I understand you have a little boy."

"That's right." Falkner thought she saw surprise cross Brobich's face in spite of the guard she'd placed on herself.

"Is there someone he could live with, who would take care of him, if you were in prison?"

Yes, that was surprise, and fear. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I know you want to protect your friend. I respect you for it. But if you continue to tell that story, you're opening yourself to charges of accessory to as many as four murders. And you will get prison time for that."

"It's not a story!"

"I think Anna and Erika did come to your house that night. Sometime after 12:30 a.m. they came to the back door. They were frightened and upset. You let them stay. Anna asked you, if anyone questioned you, to say they'd been there all night."

Brobich was silent. Her chest rose and fell, and her breath whistled in her nostrils.

Falkner concentrated on matching Brobich, inhale for inhale, exhale for exhale. *Now for the chisel.* "They were hungry, weren't they? They were *starving*."

Brobich's eyes flew wide.

"They ate anything you could give them. Dry cereal. Frozen peas straight from the bag. Raw eggs. Pancake mix."

"I don't-- How did you--" Brobich managed to bring herself to a stammering halt. But the lock was broken, and Brobich knew it as well as Falkner did.

Falkner let the silence creep in before she said, "Anna didn't tell you why she needed you to lie, did she? If you'd been certain, it would have been harder to stick to your story. But when you heard Aidan Hewell had been killed, you wondered."

Brobich said, gravel-voiced, "My girl didn't do murder. I know she wouldn't do that. I think maybe she saw it. Maybe she knew who did it. I said they'd been at my house all night so whoever killed him wouldn't come looking for her."

Falkner leaned back. *When they give you what you ask for, take off the pressure.* "But that's not what she told you."

"She didn't tell me anything. Erika, she was just gone to pieces. She was crying, and sometimes she'd kind of scream at Anna and start beating on her. Anna was scared, but she was angry, too. Bottled-up angry, like she was going to burn up from the inside."

"Why do you think that was?"

Brobich frowned, tilting her head as if listening. *She's never asked herself that.* "I don't know. Why would she be mad that somebody killed that sonofabitch? She wouldn't have crossed the street to piss on him if he was on fire." Brobich lifted her eyes to Falkner's face, still frowning. "I don't know."

"Thank you, Ms. Brobich," Falkner said, and stood up. "I'm very glad you told me what happened. I'll get an officer to drive you home."

She stepped into the hall, flagged down a sheriff's deputy, and asked him to give Lorayna Brobich a ride. Then she went into the next room and closed the door behind her.

Chaz looked grave. "You used her son."

"You would have done the same thing," Falkner said.

"Oh, yeah. I just wasn't sure you would."

"Do you think I crossed a line?"

"No," he said, immediate and firm. "I guess I just don't fully appreciate my friends' ruthlessness."

Baumgartner cleared his throat. "One of those girls beat Aidan Hewell's head in."

"Almost certainly Anna," Chaz said. "But there's still no proof."

"Why Anna?"

Chaz turned to Baumgartner, and Falkner winced inwardly and in advance for

Baumgartner's disillusionment. "Because Erika loved Aidan Hewell, even though he was her abuser. And Anna tries to protect victims."

*

"Goddamned fucking garbage in!" Hafidha screamed, and Brady banged through the bullpen doors and into Hafidha's sanctum with his heart around his Adam's apple.

"Jesus fucking piss-drinking fumble-fingered drunk-ass student work-release dipshits!" Hafidha, her fingers clenched in her hair, was yelling at her monitor, which as far as Brady could tell displayed an innocent list of names and numbers.

Brady clutched the door frame to stay upright while the adrenaline pumped away. "Damn, woman, you could give *me* lessons."

"They typoed her name! They fucking typoed her name!" Hafidha jabbed her finger at the screen.

"What are you--"

"It's the list of people who had keys to Jablonski's lab at UW-Madison. She's listed as Erica-with-a-C *Howell*. So she didn't show up on my search mother*fuckers*!"

"Girl, I'm just glad to know you're still not God."

"Yeah, wait till the next time I write search parameters."

"So Erika Hewell had access."

"But she wasn't one of Jablonski's students, because, believe me, I *did* search his class enrollments. He taught some upper-level courses, and in the grad school. She dropped out in her third year."

"So why did she have a lab key?"

"Let's find out." Hafidha flicked her right hand upward at the wrist, then poked the air with her index finger. With each poke, the computer gave a touch-tone beep. "Promise to stay quiet," she said as she dialed, "and I'll put this on speaker."

Brady lifted his empty palms in the universal gesture of "what the fuck."

"Zoology," said a young woman's voice from the speakers.

"Oh, hi!" Hafidha's voice was half an octave higher than usual, and produced from somewhere between her upper palate and her nose. "Look, I need to find somebody, and there's gotta be someone in the department who knows her. This is--" She tapped a name on the key card list. "--Nina Padget. I graduated

last year. Is there anyone around who knows Erika Hewell?"

After an instant that seemed weeks longer, the woman said, "I just started this semester. Jason, do you know an Erika Hewell? I've got somebody who wants to find her."

A man's voice, at a distance, replied, "Kiss of the Spider Girl! Sure, I'll take it."

Brady and Hafidha rolled their eyes at each other.

"Hello?"

Hafidha bubbled, "Hi! This is Nina Padget."

"Nina... Yeah, I remember you. Jason Sugarman."

"Jason! Hi." Hafidha sounded deliriously happy. "Oh, man, this takes me right back. Look, I want to get in touch with Erika Hewell. She said something once about a grant program, and I forgot the details. Is she around the department?"

"Uh... No."

"But she said she was going to-- Oh, gawd, did the Jablonski thing blow up on her?"

Jason sounded a little more confident. "You could say that."

"Everybody knew he wasn't going to leave his wife."

"Apparently, not Erika."

"Oh, gawd. She made a scene, didn't she?"

In the silence that followed, Brady felt certain, Sugarman was reminding himself that he was an adult, in a respected institution of higher learning, entrusted with the reputations of distinguished professionals.

"In the lab," Sugarman said, his voice lower and breathy, as if he was trying to stay out of earshot of anyone else. "It was pretty ugly. Stuff about being his unpaid assistant, and how he took her for granted. She said his spiders were nicer to her than he was."

So much for maturity and professionalism, Brady reflected.

"No, in the lab?" Hafidha gasped.

"They were alone, but you know those doors. You could hear 'em down the hall. The worst was when she said she was counting on grad school, and he said she couldn't make it past the first cut."

Hafidha took that in. "He was going to sponsor her application."

"She thought so, anyway."

"Poor kid," Hafidha murmured.

"What?"

Hafidha reassumed the voice. "And then he died, right?"

"Like a week later."

"What happened to her? Where did she go?"

"Home, I guess. You wanted to get hold of her?"

"You know what? I think maybe I shouldn't bother her. Thanks, though, Jason. It's been great catching up."

Hafidha killed the connection in the middle of his good-bye. "The primary currencies of academia: publishing and gossip. Damn, Jablonski didn't just fuck her. He *fucked* her. She thought she'd found another daddy figure. Then it all went boom."

"And she stole his spider eggs and got one of his test subjects to bite him," Brady said, partly as a reminder of which side they were supposed to be on.

"Or it bit him, and that's what gave her the big plan. She couldn't count on the men in her life, so she'd breed some she *could* count on."

Brady sighed. "You know that phone conversation was what a judge would call 'false representation,' don't you?"

"Knowledge is power, sweetie."

"We're not exactly empty-handed."

Hafidha looked over her shoulder at him, and he thought, *The shooters. It was always Sol or Hafidha.* Her face said she'd weighed the options and decided it was reasonable to take the shot. "There are two people the information in that phone call might hurt. One of them is Jablonski, and he won't care, 'cause he's dead. The other one might be about to try to kill my family."

Brady pushed away from the door frame. "Then you better call 'em and pass it on."

*

Tan squirmed in the passenger seat of the rental, trying to find the spot where the lumbar support and his back would quit arguing the details of human anatomy. "Is there an unspoken policy that men in the ACTF can't drive?"

Lau kept her eyes on the road. "Have you ever ridden with Chaz? And Brady's a Texan. Enough said."

"I'm a very good driver. Ask Padma."

"Reyes is a good driver. So's Duke. No one's saying men can't drive."

"You just want all the fun."

She smiled. "Took ya long enough."

Lau turned off County Road G into what looked to be a cross between an aging suburban housing development and a mobile home park, and pulled up in front of a lime green double-wide trailer. Icicle mini lights dangled unlit from the edge of the roofline. Fake pine garland coiled around the wrought-iron railing of the front steps, studded intermittently with red plastic bows. The holiday decor combined oddly with the human-high palm tree made of rope lighting that pretended to grow from a cut-down barrel beside the gravel walk.

"Okay, then," said Tan. "Not what you expect from a potential arch-criminal."

"I want the palm tree." Lau shut off the engine and clicked her seat-belt latch. "Goes with my skeleton flamingos."

Tan buzzed the front doorbell twice, and was almost convinced no one was home. Suddenly the door opened a couple inches, and a young woman with cherry-red hair in a thick pink terry-cloth robe squinted through the gap at them.

Lau showed her ID. "Special Agents Nicolette Lau and Arthur Tan of the FBI. Is Anna Krol here?"

The red-haired woman blinked twice. A mild funk of day-old marijuana smoke leaked out past her. "Nope. The fridge is empty, and Spider lost the coin toss. Try back in half an hour."

"Are you her housemate?" Lau glanced at the notes on her phone. "Stephanie Schulketz?"

"I prefer Stevie, and sometimes we mate outside the house. Why?"

Have they stopped circulating the memo? Tan wondered. *The one about the FBI having no sense of humor of which we are aware?* "Do you mind if we come in and ask you a few questions?"

Stevie frowned. Before she could speak, Tan said, "If you want to do a quick tidy-up before we come in, that's fine. We're trying to learn what happened to Rydel Pope. We're not interested in anything else, honest."

Stevie stared at him for a long moment, then said, "Fuck, I'm not going to be able to fall back to sleep. Want some coffee?"

"Thanks," Lau said. "But we tanked up at Mocha Moment."

"And didn't bring me any? Bitch." She grinned and held the door open.

The trailer appeared to have been decorated via Craigslist in an attempt to re-create the 1960s. The papasan chair cupped a faded red cushion, the humdrum sofa wore an Indian bedspread disguise, and a gold bottle-glass lamp hung on a bronze chain from the ceiling. The string of multicolored lights crisscrossing the acoustic tile overhead were too dusty to be seasonal. If he didn't look out the window at snow and pine trees, Tan would have expected to walk out the door into Haight-Ashbury. Which was one way to survive a Wisconsin winter, he suspected.

As Stevie started the coffee in the kitchen nook, she said, "Hey, if one of you is in charge, does that mean the other is the junior G-man?"

Tan said firmly, "No."

"As Agent Tan said, we're investigating the death of Rydel Pope." Lau's deadpan could rival Falkner's.

"Spider mentioned that. The whole 'special agents' thing cracked us up. It sounds like you ride the short bus."

"The what?"

"You know. The bus for the special needs kids. Like when the regular agents are too busy, they send you."

"In the FBI, we're all special--" Tan began, then finished, "I can't believe I said that."

As Stevie laughed, Lau asked, "What do you think happened to Pope?"

"Serious bad luck. His fifteen minutes of fame came from being bitten on the wrong continent. Do you think a customer lost a pet spider at Road Rabbits, and it went home with him?"

"It's too soon to speculate."

"Spider said he was a bastard, but that's not enough to make anyone put a poisonous spider in his socks."

Lau nodded noncommittally, then looked around the trailer. "This must be convenient for getting to work, but isn't it a bit of a drive when Anna wants to see her sister?"

Stevie opened the refrigerator and took out a quart of milk, which, Tan

noticed, was literally the only thing in the fridge. "Does Erika have something to do with this?"

"We check out plenty of dead ends," Tan said. "Fat reports make bosses happy. Could she have something to do with Rydel's death?"

"No way. Erika's freaky, but she's not Addams Family freaky."

"How freaky is she?"

"Um. Hoarder freaky?"

"I talked with her yesterday at her house," Tan said. "I didn't see hoarding."

Stevie flipped hair out of her eyes. "Well, not hoarding, exactly. But you try to change one thing there, and it's like you're killing a baby. Whose name is Jesus."

"She keeps the place pretty warm."

"You think? And did you notice the smell? Spider and I tried living there for a while, before we got this place." Stevie shook her head at the memory, then poured herself a cup of coffee and splashed milk into it.

"What sort of smell?" Lau asked.

"Mildew. I fucking hate mildew."

That was it, Tan realized, the smell he'd noticed. A smell he associated with feeble old men and damp carpet.

Stevie added, "Erika ran the humidifier all the damn time, and kept the place super warm. All the towels and rugs got mildew, and stuff went moldy. I kind of lost it when I realized the salt shaker had rusted. *Rusted*. I mean, seriously?" She carried her brimming cup past him and plopped down on the sofa without spilling. *Waitress,* he thought with half his attention, and shooed it away. More important things...

"Lost it how?" Tan asked, as casually as something like that could be asked.

"Oh, you know. There was yelling." Stevie gave him a lopsided smile. "I got all up on my high horse and said shit was going to change or Spider and I were out of there. As soon as the words were out of my mouth--I didn't even have to see Spider's face--I realized I didn't get to speak for her."

Tan nodded and sat down on a round, fat ottoman near the sofa. "You were asking her to choose between Erika and you."

"Yeah. Except it never got to that. Erika blew the hell up and said she wanted us to leave. Said she never wanted us there. And that Spider had always hated the place anyway, so why was she living there?" Stevie sighed and shook her

head. "I wanted to fucking shoot myself, I really did. It hurt Spider so much that Erika said that, and it was my fault."

"So you moved out," Lau said gently.

"After that..." Stevie pressed her lips closed. "They made up. It's okay now, pretty much. We visit her."

Lau asked Stevie, "Do you go there often?"

"It depends, I guess. And I try to keep to the living room and the bathroom. If her water heater broke, I don't know what the hell she'd do."

"The water heater?"

"If you open the basement door, it's like you're killing Baby J and Baby Krishna, too. She takes the idea of personal space way too far."

The sound of a holed muffler made all three of them look up. "There she is," Stevie said, jumping up and hurrying to the door.

An old Honda with a swarm of bumper stickers on its tail had parked next to the trailer. Stevie flung open the front door. "Hey, Spider! The G-men are here! The G-woman's kinda hot!" She glanced at Tan and added, "You're also hot in a guy way."

Anna Krol, in a long black parka with her hands full of Pick 'n' Save bags, stood at the bottom of the front steps, looked at Tan, and said, "What the fuck did I not fucking answer fucking yesterday?"

She stamped up the stairs and pushed through the door. Stevie stepped back and looked from Tan to Anna, then stepped back again.

Lau said, "Ms. Krol? I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau. We're here to ask you a few questions about your sister."

Anna dropped the bags on the counter and turned. "Erika? You think *Erika* had something to do with Asswipe's death?"

Tan was impressed. He hadn't thought Anna Krol could look more disdainful, yet he was clearly wrong.

Lau shook her head. "We just--"

"She's a scared kid who barely leaves the house. The only things she knows about Rydel are what I told her and what she's seen on TV."

"What've you told her?" Lau asked.

"That he was an asshole."

Stevie said, "And about that time he shoved you against the wall."

Anna glared at her. "Stevie, shut up."

Stevie said, "When he said you should look up some of the shit that happens to union organizers."

"Stevie!" Anna turned on Tan and Lau. "This interview is over."

Stevie frowned. "Spider, it's like being on *Bones*. If they want to waste time, so what?"

Anna pointed at the door and glared at Tan and Lau. "Fucking go already!"

Stevie put her hand on Anna's shoulder. Anna jerked away from it.

"Anna," Lau said, "at least three people have been murdered. There *will* be more."

"It's got nothing to do with Erika."

"I think you know it does. When Lou Kirkland died after your sister told you about his letter, it crossed your mind, but you didn't believe it."

"Get *out* of my *house*." Anna grabbed one of the bags off the counter and took a step toward the refrigerator.

"But when Rydel Pope died-- You've been trying to ignore what you know. What happens when the next person dies, Anna?"

"God damn it, are you deaf, or just fucking stupid?"

"We'll bring her in for questioning--"

"No! Stay away from her!"

"-- and if we find evidence, she'll be under arrest for--"

"*Don't you touch my sister!*"

Tan's hand was on the grip of his weapon under his jacket, and he wondered how it had got there. The brown paper grocery bag was crushed between Anna's hands, and a dark stain spread across the bottom, dripping yellowish liquid. He remembered the sound, part pop, part crack, like a breaking bone. A glass bottle of orange juice.

"Oh, baby," Stevie whispered, then louder, "Oh, baby. It's okay." She put her arms around Anna's shoulders and kissed her cheek.

Anna stood motionless as juice puddled on her boots and the floor. Only her lips moved, twisting and squeezing as if they wrestled with something inside her mouth.

Lau stepped forward.

"Nikki," Tan warned.

But Lau kept going. She laid her hands lightly over Anna's, then gathered the wreckage of the bag, slid it out of Anna's grip, and set it on the vinyl floor of the kitchen.

Anna's legs folded under her and she sat down hard, dragging Stevie with her.

Lau wiped her hands on her coat and crouched next to Anna. "That's what you said to your stepfather, isn't it?"

Anna raised her face. It was blotchy, as if she were crying, but her eyes were dry. "What?"

"What you said to your stepfather the night he died. 'Don't you touch my sister.'"

When Anna didn't reply, Lau continued softly. "You knew Erika worked with spiders in college. You knew she kept something in the basement she wouldn't let you see. You wanted to protect her, but you couldn't figure out how to protect her from *herself*. So you pretended there was nothing to see. Because you would have gone crazy otherwise."

Anna began to rock a little. Stevie hugged her tighter and stroked her hair. "Shhh, shhh."

"I want you to leave now," Anna said, flat-voiced and grating. "Please."

Stevie looked from Lau to Tan. "I think maybe you better."

As they went out the door, Tan saw Lau lay one of her cards on the kitchen counter, beside the surviving grocery bags.

In the car, Tan said, "The world's full of people who can't catch a break...and then the anomaly shows up. Is that how it usually is?'

Lau kept her eyes on the road. "Sometimes." After a moment, she added, "Most of the time."

They traveled in silence through the winter landscape, gray and tan and pale blue. *Fix this,* he ordered himself. So he sighed theatrically. "Wisconsin. Basements. What is it with Wisconsin and basements?"

"You and Duke can argue about which is scarier, Wisconsin or Texas."

"Hah. I've got Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Barry Petrewski. And now, mind-controlled poisonous spiders in a basement! Does the new guy go in first?"

Lau grinned. "If I have anything to say about it."

*

Esther Falkner gathered her team and Detective Baumgartner for what she hoped would be their last conference around the squad room table.

Chaz told the room, "The Sydney funnel-web spider is usually up to two inches long. If Erika's been breeding them, it's possible she's figured out how to increase both the toxicity of the venom and their size."

Baumgartner rubbed his eyes. "When I said you guys did the Batman cases, I really didn't expect giant super-spiders."

Chaz shrugged. "*Possibly* giant super-spiders. They deliver a full dose when they bite, usually striking repeatedly. In extreme cases, symptoms appear in less than an hour--one study found a median time of twenty-eight minutes. There's a case of a small child dying within fifteen minutes of a bite. But that was before the development of an antivenom."

"Which, if we need it, may arrive at the hospitals in time," Falkner added.

Baumgartner said, "So we're going in with rabbits' feet and our fingers crossed hoping we don't get bit?"

Falkner turned to him. "Do emergency services in the area have Level B hazmat gear?"

"Janesville Fire Department. They're the only Level B team in the county. You want 'em to go in?"

"No, we need to borrow their equipment. I'm sure they're good at their jobs, but they're not trained to do what we do."

"Which is?"

Falkner considered his round, pink face, and wondered at the firmness in it. "Erika Hewell is not...an ordinary person. We're trained in the psychology of criminals like her."

Baumgartner stuck out his lower lip. "You mean the kind that tell spiders what to do?"

No one tried to answer him. Because what could they say?

He added, "I never thought this was somebody who dropped a damn spider down the chimney and hoped it bit the right person. Everything pointed to it not working that way."

Falkner drew a long, slow breath, which was as much stalling for time as anything else. "There are things we're not allowed to tell you." Over

Baumgartner's shoulder, she saw Chaz wince, and Lau give him a wordless sympathetic glance.

"That's okay," said Baumgartner. "I'd rather have silence than bullshit."

"Then I promise that whatever I say, it won't be bullshit. Here's what we're going to do. I'll go up to Hewell's front door looking as harmless as possible and ask her to come with me. If she comes peacefully, we bring her in, seal the house, and wait for specialists to come in and deal with the spiders."

"If she doesn't?" Baumgartner asked.

"Then my team will be ready with hazmat suits and spray tanks of insecticide. We'll do a hard entry, take Hewell into custody, and neutralize her livestock."

"Do we have to kill the spiders?" That was Lau.

"With more resources and information, maybe we wouldn't. It's possible the cold alone would keep the spiders contained. But you know I can't call it that way."

Tan raised a hand. "The profile says she's more likely to defer to a man."

Falkner remembered being the new guy, what it was like to balance caution and the need to prove yourself. "No one expects you to volunteer for this."

Tan blinked. "I...am, though. Yes. I am."

Baumgartner said, "Hell, if you just need a dumb guy to tell her she's under arrest--"

Chaz said, "If you're taking volunteers--"

Falkner stared at Tan until she saw him twitch. "She seemed to make a connection with you."

"I think so."

Baumgartner was sitting next to her; she shouldn't speak too freely. But she owed him the warning as much as Tan. "Remember, Erika Hewell is potentially dangerous herself, aside from the spiders. She'll be abnormally strong and fast, and her motivations may be unexpected. Don't drop your guard." She surveyed the faces around the table. "Any of you."

And that, short of an FBI white paper that wasn't forthcoming, was as far as she could go. "Tan, you'll take point. If she doesn't come willingly, walk away from the house and let the rest of us handle it. For all we know, she may keep a few friends in her pockets."

Baumgartner pushed himself away from the table. "I'll call East Side Station and get 'em to meet us out there with the Hazardous Materials Response unit."

*

I'll have to tell Padma I volunteered, Tan thought. *I may be lucky if the spiders get me.*

While the others gathered gear and arranged tactical support, he found a quiet corner of the station and called Padma, wondering if he would be happier if she picked up or he got voice mail. When she said, "Hey, Wart," he knew the answer.

"Hey, Peanut. Just checking in with my favorite girls."

"One's napping. The other is very glad to hear your sexy, sexy voice."

He felt a pleasant shiver course his nerves. "I'm afraid someday you'll wake up and realize you married the vice president of the AV Club."

He could hear her smile. "Of course I did. This way I never have to program the DVD recorder. You realize I know what you're up to with these phone calls."

"You do?"

"You're about to do something dangerous, and you want to make sure you've told me you love me before you do it."

He considered denying it, but not for long. "...Maaaaybe."

"Well, keep it up." When he didn't answer immediately, she said, "What?"

"I volunteered for something. It was the right choice."

"How much more should I worry?"

"Hardly at all."

"Wart..."

"I don't know how to measure it."

She didn't pause. "Home watching TV is one. Running into a burning house is ten."

"What did you think it was before I called?"

"Five. I'll always think it's at least five when you're on a case."

"Then it's six."

"No lie?"

"Never a lie."

"If it's ever ten and you can call, I still expect it."

He laughed. "You expect, 'Hi, honey, running into a burning house, love you, talk later'?"

She said, perfectly seriously, "Not having time to call is an excuse. Anything else is just being an asshole."

"You are a hard woman."

"Which is why you love me."

"It's on the long list." He glanced around the room. His teammates were almost ready. He said, "Gotta run. *Main tumse pyar karta hoon*, bunch of honey."

"*Wo ai ni*, sweet thing."

Act V

"Tap, tap, tap. Is this thing on?" Tan asked the air as he looked across the street at the Hewell house. In daylight it looked swaybacked and weary, its siding faded and stained with rust and mildew.

"You sound just like you," Chaz Villette's thin tenor sounded in his earpiece.

"Remember," Falkner chimed in, "try to talk her out. Don't go in the house."

"Got it," he said, and started walking.

He wasn't alone. Police and sheriff's deputies were watching from cover on all sides of the house. The trailer beside him, that looked as if it might be loaded with construction gear, hid his teammates in Tyvek, heavy boots, gloves, and breathing equipment. Plenty of backup.

Okay, Erika. Let's leave 'em with nothing to do.

He pressed the doorbell. In one of the door's side lights the curtain twitched; then Erika Hewell opened the front door.

Her thinness screamed "gamma" to him now. *Innocent until proven anomalous.* If the world knew about the anomaly, mobs would hunt down and kill people with overactive thyroid glands. Her smile said "shy girl" and that was who he needed to reach.

She wore a red cardigan, white crewneck, and gray jeans. Her hair had been washed and carefully braided. He could imagine her stepfather telling her she looked pretty, and his heart broke a little as she pushed open the storm door. "Special Agent Tan! Would you like to come in?"

The entry area behind her had been tidied and vacuumed. The bit of the living room he could see looked as if it had been cleaned up, too.

He could grab her wrist and jerk her out of the house. *Were* there spiders in her pockets? What was the line between practical and paranoid? Who did he fear disappointing more, Falkner or Padma?

Orders are orders. "I wish I could." He made himself smile, which felt fake and shiny. Chaz should have done this after all, with his cautious grimace that fit into every situation. But her smile widened. He said, "Would you mind coming with me to the station? We've got a few questions we'd like to ask."

Her pleasure stayed on her face as her mouth opened. Behind him, from the street, he heard a resonating thunk, hollow plastic on something hard. Erika's gaze left him and focused over his shoulder. For an instant her eyes narrowed. Then they flew back to his face, and her smile looked the way his felt.

It just went pear-shaped.

"Sure," she said. "Let me get my coat."

She stepped back and closed the inner door. He heard the deadbolt thud home, and her quick steps fading in the hall.

"We're blown!" he said for the microphone. "She's running!"

"Tan, pull back," Falkner ordered in his earpiece, as Baumgartner said, "All units, suspect on the move. Cover the exits."

"Erika, wait!" Tan shouted through the door. "We're not going to hurt you. Erika!"

A stranger's voice crackled in his ear. "No movement on the back door." Another voice: "North side, no movement." And another: "South side, nothing."

Tan looked over his shoulder and saw his teammates, like rumpled astronauts in their hazmat suits, jogging across the street. The plastic spray tanks of insecticide hung from slings across their bodies, a bandolier without cartridges supporting a sci-fi movie mystery weapon.

A mystery to him. But not to Erika, who studied insects.

Who would have seen the tank that had fallen in the street, that still rocked against the curb.

She wasn't afraid they'd hurt *her*.

*

Falkner felt isolated in her suit and mask. Her breathing sounded more

immediate than the voices over her earpiece; those voices connected to the baggy white forms of her team only because she knew they must. Reflections glancing off the clear plate before her face gave everything she saw a televised, two-dimensional quality. The filtered air had no smell and didn't move against her skin.

"Clear!" said Chaz from the far bedroom, and Lau repeated it from the kitchen.

Daylight, too, contributed to the unreality of the house's interior. It was shabby and ordinary, and except for the houseplants, impersonal. Falkner searched those plants with a high-powered flashlight and the end of her sprayer wand, but nothing moved among them but the leaves she'd disturbed.

"I'm going into the basement," Lau said.

"Wait for backup." Falkner got to the kitchen in two accelerated heartbeats and found Lau's small white-suited form at the basement door. "Chaz, we're going in. Heads up, everyone." Because proximity was pressure, and they didn't know what Erika could do under pressure.

According to Anna Krol, there were no guns in the house. Baumgartner had found that reassuring. To her team, it was almost irrelevant.

There was light downstairs, but not the shadowless brilliance of the laboratory. They descended slowly, watching in spite of the protection of the suits for scurrying motion along the stair rail, underfoot, overhead. Would they hear them, as Falkner expected to in her motel room?

While they were watching for spiders, would Erika ambush them? A gamma would have the strength to rip Tyvek.

The basement wasn't a laboratory, but a nursery. It had been cleared to make room for an old Ping-Pong table covered with assorted aquarium tanks, heaters, and water misters. The screen covers were pulled away from about half the tanks.

Erika Hewell stood against the wall across from the foot of the stairs. Her arms were half-extended, as if in welcome. A spider nestled in each bare palm; another half-dozen crawled over her sleeves. The bare bulbs in the ceiling fixtures shone on each glossy purple-brown body. A cluster of them clung to her sweater, circling her neck like a dark mockery of a garland. One scuttled across her smooth hair and stopped above her ear.

"Put them back in their homes, Erika," Lau said, strong in her ear. "You're in charge here. We know that. We don't want to harm you or your spiders, but you're the one who has to keep them safe by putting them back where they can't be hurt."

Erika's chest rose and fell as she looked from Lau to Falkner and back. Nothing in her face said she was listening.

We're enemies. Monsters. Shapeless, faceless things with amplified voices. Falkner turned down her radio and raised her voice to be heard past her faceplate. "Erika. This is Esther Falkner. Agent Tan and I were here yesterday evening."

Erika's head swung toward her, and her living necklace shifted. "Get away from me."

"Erika, I can't imagine how you feel. I know you've been hurt, that you've suffered. I don't want to make it worse."

Erika didn't speak, but in her face Falkner saw a subtle change. Interest? Curiosity? Lau shifted slightly, to move Falkner into the foreground.

"Maybe I can help. It must be hard to trust people. They fail you, don't they? Your mother should have protected you. Dr. Jablonski betrayed you--"

Erika's snort of disgust startled everyone in the basement, including the spiders.

"That's why you killed him, isn't it?"

"Killed him?" Erika was shocked, outraged. "I *loved* Jon! He died by accident. And after he was gone, I knew they'd destroy the eggs, and all his work would be gone, too, so I took them. I was the only one who cared as much as he did!"

The spiders scrambled over her, perhaps disturbed by her emotions.

"I'm so sorry." *My God, how do I negotiate from inside this thing? Voice, expression, body language, all muffled.* "Erika, I understand how much you care. Let us help you. Let us take you to your sister. She's so worried about you."

"You don't understand anything." Erika's chin lifted with what looked for an instant like pride.

It was also what people did when they prepared themselves for fear and pain.

"Erika, don't--"

Erika smiled. For the first time, she looked cruel. "Tell Anna I forgive her."

Falkner jammed her thumb down on the sprayer button and pointed the wand at Erika. Lau was almost as quick. Insecticide beaded on Erika's hair and clothes. Erika raised her hands to shield her face, heedless of the spiders in them.

The spiders still clung. And they began to bite.

Lau lunged forward, trying to knock spiders off with the end of her wand. A few fell off. It wouldn't be enough. Falkner closed in and sprayed each spider, close-range. Some dropped. Some were stuck in the yarn of Erika's sweater, twitching as the insecticide reached their nervous system.

Erika's eyes and mouth were squeezed tight closed. Falkner couldn't tell if the moisture on her pale face was insecticide, sweat, or tears. She swayed, slipped down the wall, and sat on the concrete floor, drooping sideways.

"We need a medic team in suits in the basement! Now!" Falkner shouted. Lau repeated it, and Falkner remembered she'd turned her radio down. She sprayed every spider still moving, then sprayed them whether they moved or not, then brushed their bodies off Erika's slumped form. By the time the paramedics got down the stairs, they needed the hazmat gear to protect them from the cloud of insecticide. But the liberated spiders were dead.

*

Arthur Tan sat on the back bumper of a sheriff's car in front of Erika Hewell's home. He'd decided several minutes ago that he was about as familiar with the events of the very recent past as he was likely to get. Still, he kept checking them over.

The car sagged a little under a second weight, and Tan looked up to see Chaz Villette beside him, shoulders hunched up and in, long thin legs thrust out in front of him. He wore the nonsmiling version of the expression Tan had judged, standing at the Hewell front door, as more effective than whatever he himself was doing.

"You okay?" Chaz asked. Then, as if the words were a bad idea, he grimaced.

"Yeah," Tan said. "Just thinking."

"It'll still come back at three a.m., you know."

Tan nodded. He'd planned to leave it at that. But he found himself saying, "I keep going over it. Things I could have done or not done."

Chaz leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, and didn't say anything, let alone the things Tan expected, like "You followed orders" or "You did everything you could."

So Tan said, "It went south when somebody dropped that tank. I saw her reaction. And I know... If I had been more inside her head, seen it the way she was seeing it, I could have done the right thing. I'd have been on her side."

"But we're not," said Chaz.

It stopped him; it was a thought from the present, not the recent past.

"Which would you rather live with," Chaz continued, "that you were honest with her, or that you lied to her? You have to pick one or the other."

"I'd pick the one that doesn't end with her in the ambulance."

Chaz shook his head. "I don't think that one was ever on the table."

Falkner walked toward them from the hazardous materials trailer. Her suit was wrinkled, wisps of her dark hair fell loose around her face, and the lines around her mouth and eyes seemed to have multiplied since yesterday. When she reached conversation distance, she held up her phone. "Erika started seizing in the bus. By the time she reached the ER there wasn't much they could do."

"Antivenom?" Chaz asked. "Did they have it?"

Falkner shook her head.

*

This is what we do, Falkner thought. *We save them when we can, and we mourn them when we can't, but the logic of survival says we have to watch a broken girl kill herself. We watch, and remember. Because that's what life expects of us.*

The I.D. was a formality, but formalities were most important in the face of grief and loss. They straightened the corners of life where it had been knocked askew.

Anna Krol walked out of the morgue in the basement of Mercy Hospital head down, hugging herself. Falkner didn't think that was just from cold.

"I'm so sorry," she said, stepping forward.

Anna stopped and looked up. She seemed to struggle for the response to that. "Thank you," she said at last, mechanically.

"I think you loved your sister very much."

Anna looked back at the door she'd just passed through. "I would have done anything for her. But she never really gave a shit about me."

You don't believe that, Falkner wanted to say. *You just want an excuse to not hurt.* "She killed Rydel Pope for you."

Anna's face was hard, but her eyes were red and bright with tears. "You think? Or was she just looking out for her meal ticket?"

Falkner gathered her coat off a chair and slung it over her shoulder. "Would

you mind if we talked a little? Off the record. I'll buy the coffee."

"This had better not be a pass," Anna said, trying for her old caustic tone.

"We're both taken, remember?"

Falkner led the way to the hospital cafeteria, which served Starbucks and what looked like decent food. She left Anna at a table while she bought two cups of coffee and a turkey sandwich. When she came back, she set the sandwich in front of Anna.

"What's this?"

"You have a disorder that, among other things, causes you to metabolize calories too quickly. You need five to six thousand of them a day just to maintain weight, and if you're active, you need more."

Anna's mouth hung slack.

"Eat, please," Falkner ordered. "I'll talk." Falkner sipped the acceptable black coffee in the china mug. "Your sister had the same disorder. In her case, it also allowed her to control the spiders she raised. We don't know exactly how. I hoped she'd tell us."

Anna stopped chewing and struggled to swallow. After a moment she took another bite, swallowed it, and said in a fairly steady voice, "So we inherited it."

"No. We believe you caught it, probably from your stepfather on the night he died."

Anna held perfectly still, the second triangle of sandwich suspended in both hands over her plate. Falkner longed to tell her not to bother, that her very stillness said she was trying not to give herself away. "Erika and I weren't there," she said at last.

"Lorayna Brobich told us the truth."

Anna's eyes closed tight. "That stupid bitch," she sighed. The words were absurdly gentle.

"You killed him, didn't you? To protect your sister."

"No," Anna said. "I didn't kill him."

"Erika wouldn't have done it."

A muscle popped in Anna's lean jaw and her eyes narrowed. But she only said, "I didn't kill him."

"Unfortunately, even in the absence of an alibi, there's not enough evidence to

convict you. I say 'unfortunately' because if you were incarcerated I might be able to keep you safe."

Anna ate doggedly through the last of her sandwich. "That's supposed to scare me," she said when she finished.

"Why should it? You don't know what I'm talking about."

Anna pushed her plate away and slouched back in her chair. *Bring it,* her posture said.

Falkner kept her voice matter-of-fact. "My team specializes in finding people like you and your sister. When they've broken the law, we try to take them into custody and get them help. But recently we've discovered there's someone else who finds people like you. Whoever he--or she--is, he doesn't deal in prison and treatment. He's an executioner. And if we've found you, there's a very good chance he'll be right behind us." He had found Drew Pennicuik in Boston, who broke his victims' hearts for pleasure. He had found Viv Paliotto in Seattle. He'd strangled them.

"You want me to say I committed murder so you can protect me."

"There are several options I can recommend. Yes, that's one. If you confess to the murder of Aidan Hewell, you'll be taken to a secure facility in Virginia that specializes in criminals with your disorder. It's more a hospital than a prison in most cases. You'll get excellent care, education, and therapy. And the food is good." Falkner let a corner of her mouth twitch as she nodded at Anna's empty plate.

"Well, wow. I bet they're lining up for that deal." Anna bit her lip.

"It wouldn't be my first choice," Falkner admitted, which made Anna snort and visibly relax.

"What else have you got?"

"We can find you housing on the grounds of that facility, and a job there. You'll be free to come and go, but it will be easier for us to protect you. And to be honest, to study you."

"Oh, fuck that shit," Anna said.

Falkner fingered through her card case, found the right one, and passed it to Anna. "That's the contact information for the director of the facility, Casey Ramachandran. Call him. I think you'll find he'd mostly like to talk to you about yourself."

Anna picked up the card and studied it, as if she could read secrets in the texture of the paper. "There's nothing to talk about."

"You and your sister were exposed in the same incident. She went on to commit serial murder. Your impulses were so different that you risked your job and possible injury to stand up for other people. I think you may have a lot to tell Dr. Ramachandran."

Anna puffed through her lips in dismissal. But she shoved the card in the pocket of her jeans.

Falkner leaned back from the table and folded her hands on its edge. "I can think of only one more alternative: to disappear. It's difficult to construct a false identity, but you may be able to do it. The key to success is to cut every tie: geography, friends, job, hobbies, habits. But if you do, any help you can give people like you and your sister will be lost."

Anna picked up her napkin and began to tear strips off one end. "Cutting all the ties. That means Stevie."

"That means everything. Unless Stevie is prepared to become someone else, too."

"I'm pretty sure parts of that fake-I.D. thing are illegal." Anna raised her eyes from the napkin just enough to stare at Falkner from under her eyebrows.

"Then it's a good thing that if you do it right, I'll never know." Falkner pushed her chair back and stood up. "Take a little time. Consider the options. Talk to Ms. Schulketz. But the clock has started."

Anna balled the ruined napkin in her fist. "You guys sure know how to bring the fucking party."

Esther Falkner focused on fishing the rental's key out of her pocket. "Get your coat. I'll give you a ride home."

*

Federal Bureau of Investigation
Anomalous Crimes Task Force
J. Edgar Hoover Bldg., Washington, D.C.

To: Rock County Sheriff's Department
Janesville, WI

Dear Sir:

We appreciate your department's swift and appropriate response to the unusual circumstances surrounding the murder of Rydel Pope. Thanks to the awareness and prompt actions of Detective Michael Baumgartner, we were able to prevent the suspect from taking additional lives. Her accidental death was a terrible and regrettable circumstance, but it in no way reflects on the

exemplary conduct of your office and Detective Baumgartner.

We hope you won't hesitate to bring cases to our attention should they seem to warrant it.

Sincerely,

Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner

4.10 "Dark Leader" - by Elizabeth Bear, Will Shetterly, and Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

"The trouble ain't that there is too many fools, but that the lightning ain't distributed right." -- Mark Twain

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., May 2013

Establishing shot, Brady thought. *Interior. Briefing Closet. A full house, or as full as it gets these days.*

Stephen Reyes is in his old chair, back to the wall, one leg stretched out to ease a gitchy knee. Hafidha Gates and her laptop command the foot of the table, though she makes it seem like the head. Esther Falkner stands beside the door like a sentry. Even Sol Todd is in the house today, and the rest of the team--Nikki Lau, Arthur Tan, Chaz Villette, and the ruggedly handsome Daniel Brady--are in their accustomed places.

Reyes was in the house because he was trying to sell them a case he had picked out of the chaff and noise of the news cycle. Todd was there--at least ostensibly--because they were paying him, but Brady figured the only way anybody was getting Solomon Todd to let go of the anomaly was via the Narnian Werewolf technique: *Where I bite, I hold till I die, and even after death they must cut out my mouthful from my enemy's body and bury it with me.*

The face on the screen was of a girl, just old enough to be starting school. Very pale skin, very dark eyes. She was grinning as she held a big plastic trophy in shining black and gold. One of her teeth was missing. Brady found himself wondering how much the tooth fairy had given her and whether Gray would want to adopt someday, then thought, *If this is a case, it's going to be a bad one.*

The silence in the room meant everyone was thinking their version of the

same thought. Brady glanced at the parents first, Falkner, Tan, and Reyes, but they simply looked professional. Then he saw the most guarded expression was Chaz's. Maybe the blandest expression was Hafidha's, but Brady had accepted long ago that his profiling fu failed when he tried to apply it to her. So long as she wasn't freaking out, he trusted whatever he got from Chaz about her.

Reyes said, "I told myself when I retired I'd pay less attention to the news."

Todd exhaled, just loud enough to let everyone know he thought that was hilarious.

Reyes nodded. "Instead, I'm paying attention to different news. Local news matters more, and so do personal interest stories, like this one from Pittsburgh. It's the kind reporters hate to admit they love. Ten days ago, Amelia Weber won the second grade science fair at Eisenhower Elementary School with a project on cumulonimbus clouds. It made the local news that night. Her parents and teacher talked about what a precocious child she was. The next day, she was hit by lightning. Her death was probably instantaneous."

Falkner said, "Cumulonimbus clouds."

Reyes nodded.

Brady was grateful that Tan was willing to be the most ignorant person in the room. "Thunderheads?"

Reyes nodded again.

Lau said, "Is there any doubt she was hit by lightning?"

Reyes shook his head. "Her father saw it. He said they were in the backyard so Amelia could check the barometer and take pictures. Her mother wasn't present, but she said that was what Amelia and her father loved to do when a storm was likely."

Chaz said, "Was the strike direct or indirect?"

"Direct. The ground was charred where she fell."

Sol said, "So far, this sounds like God's shitty sense of humor."

"That's what I thought," Reyes said. "But the news report included a short clip from Amelia's science presentation. Something about it--" He looked around the table, then said, "See what you think."

A YouTube page replaced the picture of Amelia Weber. Brady decided he hated this case even more than he expected to when he realized that "precocious" did not begin to describe Amelia Weber. She sounded like a

child, lisping and excited and shy, but her sentences were complex and she did not stumble over a single word. She concluded her report, "Percy Bysshe Shelley said poetry is a sword of lightning. I think lightning is God's pen for poetry."

The video ended. Todd asked, "Who wrote her report?"

Reyes said, "Her mother says she asked for spelling help sometimes, but she wrote that herself. Her teacher says her work in class was just as polished."

Hafidha, studying the tablet screen in front of her, said, "The Shelley quote's from 'Defense of Poetry'. 'Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.'"

"God's pen," Sol said softly.

Yeah, this'll be a hard one. Focus on the case, Cowboy. Brady looked toward Chaz and Hafidha. "Smart, skinny kid. Remind you of anyone?"

Chaz and Hafidha rolled their eyes ceilingward almost in unison.

Reyes shrugged. "I don't know." Brady wondered if retirement had made him less decisive or more careful. Reyes continued, "I didn't dig deeper than the news reports. I don't want to trouble her parents unless the team decides it's necessary. Maybe she was a beta. Maybe she was just what everyone thought, a girl who deserved more future than she got. What I researched were people around Pittsburgh who've been hit by lightning."

Todd said, "Looking for more of God's poetry?"

"Hmph."

The next face on the screen was a dark-skinned man with a tight smile and a close-cut moustache and beard. Reyes said, "The earliest possibility I've found is Russell Thorne, an atmospheric scientist at Carnegie Mellon, age 46 in the summer of 2007 when he was hit in the parking lot at a race track. He survived."

The next picture showed a woman with African-American features whose face was not pretty, but was strong. The shape of her nose and her cheekbones reminded Brady of a guy in Dallas homicide who'd claimed to be one-quarter Comanche. She wore a suit that was stylish, but conservative. "A year later, Suzanne Zettler, then 29," Reyes said. "Struck while bicycling home from class at Carnegie Mellon, where she was a grad student. Also survived. Now she's a television personality, host of a locally-produced PBS kids' show called 'Professor Suzi's Evil Science'."

Then a picture of a young couple, a woman and a man smiling at the camera. Reyes said, "Two years later. Kristen Ballott, 26, grad student in computer

science at Carnegie Mellon. Struck by lightning and killed in the summer of 2010, along with her fiancé: Jason Woo, 31, Ph.D. candidate in geology at University of Pittsburgh."

Then two more faces, both older. Reyes said, "In 2012, two deaths again in close proximity: Maurice St. Clair, 54, a TV weatherman, and the unfortunately named Candace Slaughter, mail carrier, 36."

Brady figured it was his turn to be the stupid one. "Mail carrier? How's that fit with science and weather types?"

Hafidha sing-songed, "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." Softer, she finished, "But lightning surely cramps their style."

Reyes said, "Slaughter was hit crossing the same park where St. Clair was struck three days earlier. Her death seems the most like coincidence, but..." He turned his palms upward.

Todd said, "Stephen, they all seem like that thing we don't believe in," and Brady wondered if Falkner had brought Todd in so she wouldn't have to tell her old boss he was suffering from apophenia.

Chaz frowned into empty air. "If we look at victimology, we've got three checkmarks next to Carnegie Mellon, three for meteorology more or less, four for university connections in general, and one as-far-as-we-can-tell total outlier. Kind of scattered for a profile, when thunderstorm buffs are likely to be outside in it, and Pittsburgh is a college town. But the university and meteorology connection is suggestive."

No one at the table was likely to check Chaz's figures except Hafidha, so Brady glanced her way. She was nodding.

Hafidha touched her tablet, which she did so rarely that Brady thought it must be a sign of respect. "Pennsylvania's in the top ten states for lightning deaths. They average two a year. This year, there are already four."

Todd shook his head. "The hardest rule for a journalist to accept is to never underestimate coincidences. A gamma throwing lightning bolts? By our current models, it's too much energy. He'd starve on the spot."

"Hmph." Chaz bent the edge of his notepad back and forth with the fingertips of his right hand. *Whisk. Whisk.*

"You disagree?" Falkner asked.

"Well--" Chaz scrinched up his face.

Falkner said, "Play devil's advocate."

Tan said, "And help the devil's audience as you go, Dr. Science."

Chaz's doubt broke into a grin. "Okay. A bolt of lightning's not a single thing. It's a complicated multistage phenomenon beginning when a negatively charged cloud passes over positively charged earth. Now, air's a lousy conductor, right? It has to 'break down' to really carry a jolt. When a strike begins, a negative charge descends in what's called a *stepped leader*. There are frequently multiple branching stepped leaders in a single strike. The stepped leader or leaders jump down about fifty meters every fifty milliseconds, give or take, which is why lightning looks so forky-twisty."

"That's a technical term," Lau whispered to Brady, sotto voce. Brady bit the inside of his grin.

Chaz flicked crumpled paper at her. Tan, making neat notes on graph paper with a Rapidograph, never looked up, though the paper almost parted his hair. *There's a man with a young kid.*

Chaz said, "This initial predischarge establishes an ionized path from the cloud to the earth."

"An ionized forky-twisty path," Hafidha corrected.

"Thank you, Professor Gates. These branches of ionized--broken down--air sort of grope their way downwards. They *race*, until one branch connects to another, positively charged, leader extending *upward* from a ground object. At this point, the return stroke, which is what we think of as a bolt of lightning, begins as a large equalizing charge zaps back along the path defined by the stepped leader at close to the speed of light. This generates a brilliant discharge as between two and twenty-five return leaders arc from earth to cloud--"

"Wait," Brady said. "It starts at the bottom?" He was proud of himself for thinking of that. For doing his job. It was taking all of his discipline to stay focused on the victims, on the discussion. His traitor brain wanted to race in circles, thinking about the morning, about Gray oh-so-casually pointing out that pretty soon, they'd be able to get married in Rhode Island, too.

The funny thing was Brady was pretty sure he was supposed to be panicking. Instead, he felt like a kid on Christmas Eve. *The question is, is he hinting 'cause he wants me to ask, or because he doesn't want to ask if the answer's going to be no?*

Gay people didn't used to have these problems. He bit down on that inappropriate smirk again. *Until just recently.*

Which made him think of Daphne. Which made any struggle he was having not to smile go the other way fast.

"Yeah," Chaz answered. "Technically it starts in the clouds with the stepped leader, but what you think of as a bolt of lightning bridges up. Anyway, each stroke lasts some sixty microseconds. The strokes are each separated by *another* sky-to-earth movement of charge, which is not luminescent. This is called the dart or sometimes the dark leader, and each iteration of *that* lasts somewhere around sixty milliseconds. So the dark leader is about ten times faster than the stroke."

"Insert Sith joke here," said Lau without smiling.

Chaz kept going without a skipped beat. "Thunder is generated from the shock wave formed by the rapid heating of air along the path of the return stroke, which reaches something like thirty thousand degrees Kelvin--hotter than the surface of the sun--which is also why you can see a lightning strike. Hot stuff glows."

"Chaz--" Falkner began in her we-understand-get-to-the-point voice.

"Sorry. So, God's pen? Assuming all of these people were struck at times when lightning was expected--"

"They were," Reyes said. "No unpredicted storms here."

"Then you wouldn't have to make the pen. You'd just have to suggest where to write."

"Meaning," Falkner said. "A hypothetical gamma wouldn't have to generate the actual current of a lightning strike."

Chaz nodded.

Falkner asked, "And there may be cases where a suggestion didn't succeed in hitting anyone?"

"That'd explain the gaps between the possibilities you found," Todd told Reyes.

Chaz nodded. "The gamma would just wait for the right conditions and guide the positive leaders up from where he wants the lightning to go. Although unless he's a meteorologist or a physicist, I doubt if *he* thinks of it that way. He may just think of it as witching the weather down." He stroked his chin. "You know, I bet there's a fraction of a second's warning, too."

"Warning," Nikki said, leaning forward on her elbows. Her eyebrows rose.

A couple of years back, Chaz would have looked down and blushed when she made eye contact, but now he just smiled. *They say nothing changes.* It shook Brady out of his mood, just a little. "The target would be standing in the middle of a positive static charge," Chaz said.

Todd sat back abruptly, shirt pleated in ridges by the arms folded over his chest. "So you know you're about to die when every hair on your body stands on end."

"Figure you've got about three hundred milliseconds at that point," Chaz said. "Because the ground leader and the stepped leader will usually connect about three hundred feet up."

"Three tenths of a second," Falkner said, getting it into human terms.

"A second is a long time," Lau said, quoting Todd from way back. Todd curled one corner of his mouth, an expression so redolent of not-a-real-smile that Brady filed it away for his own use in the future.

"Yeah," Brady agreed. "But is it long enough to run? Or just to start to piss yourself?"

"In this scenario," Tan said, "the gamma's only dangerous during thunderstorms."

"Depending on his mythology," Reyes said. "If he can manipulate electrical charges in general, he's capable of considerable mayhem. But he could only throw lightning bolts during thunderstorms. And only at people who are exposed to the elements. A house, a car, would provide some protection."

Hafidha looked down at her hands. Brady recognized her expression. It was the one they took turns wearing, when they were filling in the thing that Daphne might have said. "Just being near a lightning rod might provide some protection." Then she added, "They're expecting thunderstorms in central P. A. tomorrow."

"Well," Reyes said. He leaned back in his chair and looked at Falkner. "Are you going to Pittsburgh?"

Falkner turned to Lau. "Nikki, what's your take?"

Lau pursed her lips, then said, "It would be nice to rule out coincidence."

Falkner smiled. "Then this one's yours. I'm thinking a team of three."

"Three can't split up without leaving somebody without cover," Lau said. Brady didn't miss the look Falkner shot Reyes, though, and he was confident Lau didn't either.

"Tan's week in the barrel," Falkner said. "Unpaid time, courtesy of the Fiscal Cliff. And me, too. So it will be you, Nikki, along with Chaz and Hafidha, and--" She gave Reyes the levelest of level looks. "Want to do some follow-up in the field? We can't pay you, but it won't take that much more aviation fuel to smuggle you onto the plane."

Reyes shrugged, rolling his indigo shirtsleeves down. Brady could never figure out how he kept the fabric so damned crisp when it spent half its time pushed up past his elbows. Someday the Pope could use it as a qualifying miracle.

"Autumn's in Chicago with her *abuela* this week. They're going to the Field to see Sue. And to the Chicago Symphony. And to Wrigley Field. It's hard to say which one of them is more excited." Reyes paused, lifted his eyebrows. "If I can help, I'm at your disposal."

How he kept the toe of one sharp oxford from tapping under the table, Brady would never know. Brady still wasn't used to seeing Reyes...relaxed. Well, not relaxed exactly, because he was just as intense as ever. Informal. *Unwound.*

"Oh, come," said Falkner. "Before you prove spontaneous human combustion exists."

Lau said, "We don't have an invite from the locals."

"Call it counterterrorism," Todd suggested bitterly. "It's not like anybody ever checks."

Hafidha scratched her nails through her tight curls. "When did our job turn into this?"

"Life is hard," Chaz answered. "Shower, eat, exercise, dress, earn a living, oppose the injustices of a fucked up planet, perpetrate a few of your own, and for what?"

"So you can get up and do it again," Todd answered.

Falkner nodded. "Wheels up in an hour."

*

Pittsburgh was four hours by car. Using the Gulfstream, it probably took longer to drive to the airfield than they spent in the air. Chaz took the flight time to bring Hafidha a coffee nonetheless, sit down across from her, and start scrolling through victim dossiers on his tablet. He needed to review the clip of Amanda Weber's presentation, but he found himself hesitating over the play button.

Be a cop, he told himself. Then he glanced over at Nikki and couldn't, quite. Yet. *I'll watch it again before we land*, he promised himself, and snagged Hafidha's coffee cup to bring her another round.

They'd been sitting in companionable silence. She looked up from her monitor and smiled; of course she knew what his tablet was displaying. Or not-yet displaying, as the case may be.

She said. "She was adorable."

He nodded. Held up the mug. "Want a doughnut?"

"Make it three." When he came back with food and drink, she lowered her voice. "Mom was crabby with Dad."

"She didn't have to send him along."

"I said crabby, not pissed."

"She didn't think he was going to lay off investigating just because he *quit*."

"I think she hoped. And this took some data mining, Chazzie. He didn't bring me in until the end. Do you know how many people are struck by lightning every year?"

Chaz grinned. "In the U.S., or around the world?"

She sighed. "Give me the airspeed of a European Swallow while you're at it."

"Just talking fatalities, around the world, twenty-four thousand. In the U.S., according to NOAA, the thirty-year average is fifty-four as of 2011. But it's been dropping off in recent years. Pennsylvania is number six in the nation for lightning deaths. People being struck by lightning and surviving--that's a lot more common..."

"My point is, a lot. A pattern takes a while to emerge."

Hafidha ate a doughnut while Chaz temporized. Then, because she knew him well, she said, "Out with it, little brother."

"I'm speculating. Wildly."

"Speculation allowed for. Spill."

"If our gamma *is* a weather witch, maybe he has it in for weather scientists? *I heard the learn'd astronomer?* Some things should remain magical, and not be dissected and known?"

"Weather doesn't get any less magical when you put science on it. The science makes it more good. More weird. Same thing. Science *is* weirdness." Hafidha tapped her forehead. "For example. The great irony of this thing in my head is that it's a computer. I could shut it off with a thought."

"Yeah," Chaz said. He'd realized that long ago. Some nights it kept him awake. But she hadn't brought it up to be reassured.

"But as long as it's working, I don't want to."

"Yeah," Chaz said. Then: "Or... want to, but don't want to?"

The flicker of her gaze, for him--between *them*--was as good as a nod. She pursed her lips. "If I start wanting to want to... I'll try to find a way to let you know."

"That'd be good."

She pointed imperiously to the galley. "Coffee, sir."

"Coffee, your majesty," he said, rising to obey.

*

It took extra effort to be good at things you hated. Danny Brady hated waiting.

Not the stillness required by surveillance; that was part of working, not waiting, and in its own way as active as any other part of the job. But being parked in the Hoover building waiting for new case files, for the away team to ask for something, for them to come home: he hated that like a possum hates oncoming traffic.

And like the possum, he couldn't change the circumstances.

"How'd you get roped into this boojum hunt?" he asked Solomon Todd, who was studying five years of meteorologists' reports for western Pennsylvania with apparent pleasure. He'd spread them out on the floor around the couch the team had recently moved in along one wall of the bullpen, in some sort of infographic that made sense only to him.

The couch was handy for those long nights... and there was the unspoken excuse it gave them to rearrange the desks and half-height cubes. They'd all been very careful to pretend to not keep track of which of the desks had been Daphne's when they pushed them back together in the new configuration, but Brady knew it was the one that had ended up in the copy room.

Sol raised his head, and the ceiling lights winked off the lenses of his glasses. "Besides being a known connoisseur of boojums?"

"A *retired* connoisseur."

"Like Reyes. Boojumland is no country for old men. But he called me, because I have a long history of being able to tell him when he's overthinking."

"And him listening."

"Usually. And now that I've given wise counsel, I could go home. But I miss the egg salad sandwiches in the vending machine." Todd fluttered a sheet of paper languorously.

"You still technically consulting, since the sequester? When was the last time

you got paid, Duke?"

Todd shrugged. "I'm rolling in those fat stacks of publishing cash, don't you know? Besides, you need me to handle the research. How was it that you described your approach?"

"Dick-fingered," Brady said, hiding a smile. "You and Reyes between you are doing a shitty job of modeling a healthy retiree lifestyle. I don't expect to be lured back after I leave the WTF."

"You won't miss the excitement?"

"Nope. Gonna get my thrills watching the Cowboys on a big-screen TV."

Sol offered a raspberry by way of suggesting disbelief.

"What? Football, beer, a good gas grill in the backyard, maybe a dog-- I'm a pretty ordinary guy at heart, Duke."

"That's not ordinary. That's stereotypical."

"To-*mah*-to," Brady replied.

"Would you move back to Texas?"

Brady shrugged. "I'm not sure Texas is still Texas."

"There's always Austin."

"Do I look like an Austin kinda guy to you?" Galveston, maybe. Gray could have a sailboat. Was the Gulf of Mexico good for sailboats?

Goddamn, cowboy. When did you start planning thirty years ahead?

Act II

Lau and Reyes took meteorologist duty, heading out from the airfield in a rented SUV as Chaz and Hafidha went to the hotel. Hafidha had tracked down the survivors, Russell Thorne and Suzanne Zettler, while they were in the air. Thorne had office hours that ended at 3 pm: they were going there first. Zettler would be working late on a show that needed to air in two days, and had agreed to call Hafidha as soon as she was done.

To Lau's Southern-California-trained sensibilities, Pittsburgh was a city set in a dramatic landscape, even by East Coast standards. Its dominant feature was a trio of fast-running rivers at the bottom of an enormous gorge, and the city climbed the steep valley on either side, tossing bridges across the gap whenever the walls came close enough. The hills were green and leafing strongly after a hard winter, though spring was not as advanced as it would

usually be for early May.

The Carnegie Mellon campus seemed familiar. Lau credited that to it being one of many private schools built at the end of the Gilded Age by robber barons trying to improve their reputations by becoming philanthropists. Then Reyes said, "I'm Batman."

Lau stared at the set of steps they were passing. "*The Dark Knight Rises*!" Location shooting was an L.A. stereotype, but in the rest of the world, it always reminded her of home. Did Kentuckians feel the same seeing a KFC sign? "Danny would have done the voice."

"I'm a competitive individual, but I know when I'm out of my depth."

"Heh. And if not Danny, then Art." She grinned at the memory of Arthur Tan in a cape, getting Dan Morrison to confess to the Alchemist robberies. "That's right, we went to Chicago without you."

We'll always go without you now. She fell into an awkward silence at the thought. It was easy to forget he wasn't *back*.

"It's all right," he said, because of course he'd understood what had gone through her head. "I really don't mind giving up the See America and Potentially Die lifestyle." He turned his face up to a particularly handsome set of window cornices. "Carnegie and Mellon only put their names on things that made them look good."

Lau wasn't sure if the subject change was for himself or for her.

Russell Thorne was with a student when they reached his office, so they spent a few minutes cooling their heels in the hallway. The experience, Lau noted, was no less awkward as an adult than it had been as a student. Reyes looked at home--hands in his pockets, head tipped back as he studied a giant map of the United States somebody had tacked to a corridor corkboard.

"Is it strange?" she asked him. "Answering to me on a case you found?"

"If I found a case," he said. "And no. You're the agent-in-charge." He smiled, and while there was nothing more than friendship in it, she understood why his problem was keeping women, not finding them. "I have the benefit of knowing you trained under the best in the field."

Lau covered her surprise by saying, "Yeah, I hate false modesty."

He tilted his head and frowned; the creases were pulled awry by the faint scar that disappeared into his hair. "Oh. No, I meant Esther. I was never more than a competent field agent, and my management skills..." He shrugged.

Lau thought, *I wouldn't say it out loud, either*, but finished, "And yet, there

you were."

"I wasn't the right person for the job. But I was the one convinced it needed doing." Reyes smoothed the heels of his hands over his temples, as if the cropped silvering hair above his ears might be out of place. "And at least I was smart enough to drag Esther in. Todd... I couldn't have kept away with a shock prod. What's strange is Chaz being one of the people I answer to."

"Is that a problem?"

"Esther wouldn't've sent me if she thought it was." He smiled again. "Or maybe that's why you're in charge."

"Reyes. Not an answer."

"Fair enough. No, it's not--" He stopped as the office door cracked open, emitting a young Asian man from behind its frosted glass. He left the door open slightly and vanished down the hall, blue Chucks squeaking on tiles old enough that they left Lau wondering what the asbestos abatement status of this building was. She gazed after him in bemusement.

"What?" asked Reyes.

"It finally happened. That boy was twelve."

"Nineteen," Reyes said. "Welcome to your thirties. It's only going to get worse."

The brass doorknob had oxidized dark on the stem, but the bulb shone, polished and mellowed, smoothed by generations of hands. Lau pulled the door wide and knocked assertively on the frame, wearing her *I'm from the Government and I'm here to help* face and Esther Falkner's spare suit of body language, projecting capability and approachability in equal measure.

"Doctor Thorne? I'm Special Agent Lau. This is Doctor Stephen Reyes. We're here on behalf of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and we'd like a few moments of your time."

Thorne pushed to his feet and his square, strong face creased with a frown. He was a good-looking man, solid, wearing close-trimmed curls with a widow's peak that was only going to get more pronounced as he got older. He had a strong tremor in his left hand. He pressed it down on the desk to hide it.

His office was clear, spare, modern--not the map-feathered dusty den tradition would have dictated. Two golden oak and steel work tables dominated the rear wall; the desk was Swedish Modern. The display on the wall was a big, new hanging flat screen, with a whiteboard on either side. The boards were covered in multicolored scribbles, diagrams and equations. The desktop computer was a Mac.

Lau felt immediately at home.

And immediately unwelcome.

Hostile witness, she thought. Thorne didn't extend a hand. Or come around the desk.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm working. The department secretary has my appointment book."

"This'll only take a minute," Lau said, trying to walk midway between *friendly and approachable* and *she who must be appeased lest she unleash the unbearable wrath of the Federal government*.

"What's this about?"

"National security," Lau heard herself saying, and wished she could see Reyes' face.

Thorne stiffened. *Friendly!* Lau thought, and said, "It's probably nothing, but we hope you can help us look out for you."

"For me?"

Lau nodded. "In 2007, you were struck by lightning at a racetrack. Do you remember anything unusual about anyone you encountered that day?"

Reyes added, "Before or after the event. Don't censor yourself. Anything might be helpful."

Thorne said, "I can't say I do. I was simply there to have a good time." He pressed his left hand to the table again.

"Was there anyone who might've wanted to hurt you? Had you received any threats? Were you in competition with anyone?"

"Ms. Lau, you're not suggesting someone attacked me with *lightning*?"

She smiled as if that was the craziest idea she had heard in days, and didn't correct the prefix. There might be a time to push Russell Thorne, but this wasn't it. "The people we investigate don't necessarily think as you or I would."

"Should I be worried?"

"You're better able to judge that than we are, Dr. Thorne. We're following up on a very vague lead. If we thought you should be worried, we'd be talking about your protection first and what happened that day second."

"I see. I could name a few people who envy me, and a few more who don't know they should, but I can't imagine any of them would actually try to hurt

me."

"Can you give us their names? Perhaps their addresses as well?"

"I can give you their institutions."

Lau nodded. Thorne leaned over his keyboard, typed, scowled, typed a bit more, then hit print. The shaking of his hand didn't seem to interfere.

Lau recognized none of the names and all of the schools. If one could know a person by his enemies, Thorne's had solid credentials.

"Were any of them at the track that day?"

"Not so far as I know." His voice carried a clear *Are we done?*

Lau folded the printout and put it in her jacket. "Thank you, Dr. Thorne. I hope you won't mind a personal question. I've heard that sometimes lightning changes people. Have you noticed--"

"No, Ms. Lau. I've never suffered fools gladly."

His pointed stare left her no choice. She said blandly, "Then we'll let you get back to work."

If Thorne noticed her choice of "let", his expression was lost in what might've been a curt nod as he turned to his computer.

Walking down the hall, Reyes told Nikki, "He's insecure in his expertise."

She wondered if she should've let Reyes handle the interview, older black man to older black man, then decided she hadn't seen any sign that Thorne had more respect for Reyes than for her. *Never assign to misogyny what misanthropy explains.* She said, "If Thorne's it, he's cramming carbs."

"You like him for our hypothetical gamma?"

She shrugged. "We need to find out whether he was as annoying before he was hit. If I'd just learned I could control lightning, he'd make a great first target. The hand tremor--I think that's typical for survivors?" *Daphne would know.*

Scanning the names on Thorne's printout, Reyes said, "Seven of these are teaching at schools in Texas, California, and Minnesota." He stabbed his finger at one name and held it up for her to see. "But Jim McAvoy's a local weatherman. He could have motive and opportunity."

"And possibly anomalous means?" Lau snagged her phone from her jacket pocket. "Maybe we should find out if the TV camera really does add ten pounds."

*

Sitting in her hotel room with six tablet computers propped up around her and flickering though web pages as quickly as the screens could refresh, Hafidha said, "It's nice to feel wanted, but Google was all you needed this time. McAvoy and Thorne are the stars of a YouTube video called 'Prof Pwns Weatherguy'. Thorne was doing an interview to promote a book he'd written about megastorms, and McAvoy clearly hadn't done more than glance at a crib sheet. Thorne rants for a solid eighty-four seconds about how there are no more village idiots because they've all found work in television, then tears off his microphone and stomps off the show."

From her speakers, Reyes said, "Before or after Thorne was struck?"

"Before. October, 2006."

Lau's voice had the same hard-surfaced hallway resonance as Reyes's. "I'm watching it now. Huh."

"What?"

"Conflicting clues. On one hand, Thorne didn't tell us he lost weight after being hit. On the other, McAvoy's as skinny as Chaz."

Chaz popped his head up from behind the minifridge/microwave across the room. "Hey! I resemble that!"

Hafidha laughed. "Half the people in show biz could be Buggy. Who'd know?"

Lau asked, "Anything on the rest of the list?"

"I'll keep looking, but so far, there's nothing to place any of the others in Pennsylvania during the lightning strikes."

Reyes said, "I'm beginning to think I brought this to the team too soon."

Hafidha said, "Don't go all cautious on us, my ex-Capitan. This whole thing smells faintly of fish."

"And not the tasty kind," Chaz called.

Lau sighed. "I just hope we can sniff out more before bad weather hits. Another ironic death by lightning would be the worst confirmation."

Chaz had walked back to his laptop. Now his head came up. "Oh, hey, guys. Here's something interesting. So, Thorne?"

"Yeah?" Lau said.

"Before he got his Ph.D.--probably while he was working on it--he worked in

the Chambersburg, Pennsylvania high school as an Earth Science teacher. And... he was there in 1991."

The monster in Hafidha's head might have shivered in recognition. Raised its head in silent regard and glanced around with luminous eyes. The late 80s and early 90s had been notable for a series of spree killings in schools, a meme that had seemed like it might blessedly have run its course until Delia, ND. Until Sandy Hook.

Mark DeGrasso, a non-graduating senior, had killed five and wounded seven in Chambersburg Pennsylvania in May of 1991.

"You're thinking crack," Reyes said, over the speaker.

"Twenty-two years," Hafidha said. "That's a long latency."

"First crack?" Chaz asked. "Anyway, 1991 to 2007 is sixteen years, and Zettler got struck only a year after Thorne. And From everything you guys said--and that video--I'd say he'd not real secure in his place in the world or his expertise."

Lau his a smile. "Reyes said more or less the same thing."

Chaz nodded. Once, Hafidha thought, he would have grimaced at the comparison to Stephen. Now he just said, "So what if he's killing off the competition?"

*

WQED was across the street from an Eastern Orthodox church and quite literally next door to Carnegie Mellon. *How often does lightning hit crosses?* Chaz wondered. *And what do congregations think when it does?*

Hafidha pointed. "Can we take that home?"

Chaz followed the line of her finger. Near the corner of WQED's grounds, an eight-foot-tall dinosaur was dressed like Mr. Rogers in a red cardigan, white shirt and tie, dark blue trousers, and bright blue running shoes. It was holding...yes, that was the puppets King Friday and Henrietta Pussycat.

Hafs added, "Archeologists are going to think we had the best gods ever."

Chaz parked the rental as Hafs looked at her phone. It dialed on speaker, and a woman with a pleasantly low voice said, "Evil Science."

Hafidha said, "Ms. Zettler. It's the men in black."

The woman said, "Agent Gates? I'll be right out."

Chaz slid out the driver's side door and shook his head at Hafidha across the car roof. "If Mom were here, she'd take you aside for a little talk about

professionalism."

"Pfft. A good investigator knows how to develop a rapport with the interview subject. Have you seen the intro to her show?"

Chaz shook his head.

"Animated girl wearing a lab coat over a T-shirt that reads 'EVIL,' which had to be inspired by *Narbonic*, puts her hand on a Van de Graff generator and goes all Bride of Frankenstein. Also, her theme song is righteous, and she wrote the lyrics herself."

He opened the glass door for Hafs and followed her into the station lobby. "Does someone have a crush?"

"Not yet, anyway. But if she recommended any boy toys, I'd play with them."

Chaz put his fingers in his ears. "La-la-la-la."

Which was when Suzanne Zettler walked into the lobby.

Chaz jerked his fingers from his ears.

Zettler looked from him to Hafidha, who said, "I was giving him Too Much Information."

Zettler nodded. "The squeamish sex."

Her accent was middle-class East Coast. Her hair was tied behind her neck in a puff almost as large as her head. She wore a burgundy T-shirt, gray cargo pants, and black canvas commando boots. Her fingernails were silver. In the last rays of sunset, her dark-skinned face had an unsettling, asymmetrical beauty. It was as if she combined the features of two striking women, one on the left, one on the right, with the join blended into invisibility. The still photo they'd seen in the briefing room didn't do her justice. He doubted any still photo could.

Chaz said, "I'm Special Agent Villette. We just have a few questions--"

Zettler looked from Chaz to Hafidha. There was no wariness in her expression. "Any chance we could reschedule for tomorrow morning?"

Hafidha shook her head. "Sorry. This is kind of a run-and-gun job."

"Then what do you say we do this over dinner? There's a great barbecue joint nearby, and I need a break from the studio. There's a piece of voiceover that sounds awful, and I'm not sure if it's the actor's fault or the writer's, but I'm thinking a meal and a beer ought to give the producer the right perspective."

Chaz said, "Um--"

Hafs asked Zettler, "They serve sweet potato pie?"

Zettler blinked. "I did say it's a great barbecue joint."

"Dinner," Hafidha declared with a nod.

"And then you can ask me anything," Zettler said. "After being grilled by sixth-graders, the FBI will be a breeze."

Hafidha, what are you doing? But she gave him no chance to ask it out loud. Based on the grin she flashed him as he held the door for her, that was intentional.

*

The restaurant looked yuppie, but it smelled like the cook would recognize Arthur Bryant's name and could talk about the strengths and weaknesses of Kansas City barbecue. A waiter met them with, "Hey, Suze. The regular?" as he led them to a booth.

"Oh, god, yes. I haven't eaten all day."

Chaz asked, "What's the regular?"

The waiter said, "An Iron City Amber, half a smoked chicken, a rack of pork ribs, Jo-jo fries, collard greens, and corn bread."

Zettler said, "You can get a go box if there's too much."

"Too much barbecue?" Hafidha asked. "All three words are in English, but they make no sense together."

Chaz glanced at Hafidha for confirmation. All right, they'd eat like jammers in front of their interview. Who, interestingly, was also going to eat like a jammer. He should be wary. "The same all around."

Zettler's smile made his hands tingle. She looked *grateful*. He remembered being stared at for eating, for something so simple and ordinary. And he knew what a relief it was to share a meal with people who didn't treat him like a freak when he ate for three.

Suddenly he wanted Suzanne Zettler to be a beta. Not their gamma, not a killer. But someone who could say, "Oh, me, too," who could understand, who could relax and share and talk.

Hafidha met his eyes across the table. She blinked slowly, catlike, above a faint smile. Chaz swallowed hard.

As soon as the waiter left, Hafidha asked Suze, "D'you mind talking about the day you were hit by lightning?"

"You kidding? I talk about my big encounter with storm safety so much that school kids call me the Lightning Lady. Getting me to shut up is the challenge."

"What do you remember about that day?"

"The first thing that sticks with me? Something was about to happen, but I didn't know what. My skin tingled, and I heard a sound like *kee-kee* all around me. That's when you're supposed to do the lightning crouch, but I hadn't a clue what was happening. My hair felt wild--it was probably standing up. All I knew was that something I'd never experienced was about to happen. All I could think was, 'Here it comes.'" She seemed dazed at the memory.

She sighed and continued, "I don't remember the strike. A woman who knew CPR took care of me until the EMTs arrived. I was lucky I wasn't wearing much jewelry." She pointed at her silver earrings. "Burn scars on both lobes. I was in the hospital for a week. I had headaches for weeks, but now--" She shrugged. "I'm one of the lucky ones."

"What's the lightning crouch?" Hafidha asked.

"Squat down, feet together, your head to your knees, only touching the ground with your feet. It improves the odds the lightning will flow over your body instead of through it."

"Do you remember seeing anyone nearby?"

"Why?"

"We're curious about who might've been in the area that day. I'm afraid we can't be more specific."

"Ah. No, sorry. I was just walking. My mind was probably on my dissertation."

"The woman who did the CPR?"

She thought. "I don't know her name. It might be somewhere in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet somewhere? Or a newspaper morgue? Just a bystander... Wait, she was a kindergarten teacher! That's why she knew CPR."

Chaz made himself a little mental note, but he figured Hafidha was probably already checking online sources with some fragment of her attention.

As their beers arrived, Chaz said, "You were studying climatology? Did you know Professor Thorne?"

Zettler rolled her eyes. "When Russ Thorne comes your way, step aside fast. That ego crushes every obstacle in its path."

Hafidha said, "So you weren't the president of his fan club?"

"Good guess. I could've started a haters club, but that would've called for thinking about him too much."

Chaz asked, "Were you ever close?"

"God, no! He hit on me at a party, I made it clear I was a lousy candidate for that year's submissive student girlfriend, and we hardly ever talked after that. Why? The lightning coincidence? The odds for two black folks from the same school being hit within a year are wild, but God laughs at odds."

"When was that party?"

"Hmm. Sometime after he was hit by lightning, because he said something lame about electrifying possibilities. Maybe two or three months before I was hit."

Chaz said. "Was there anyone you were worried about then?"

"Worried how?"

"Did anyone around you seem threatening or unstable?"

"You do remember I was surrounded by academics."

"Unusually unstable," Chaz amended.

"No. Not really."

Hafidha asked, "Not even Professor Ego?"

"Are you kidding? By turning him down, I proved I was unworthy of him. Far as I could tell, he forgot I existed."

Chaz asked, "Was there any talk about his personality being affected by the lightning strike?"

"Someone said it was a shame it hadn't been, because any change would be an improvement. I'll deny that was me."

"What about yours?" Chaz said, before he could think better of the impulse.

Hafidha raised her eyebrows. "That's awfully blunt."

Zettler said, "I like blunt. Yes. Before the lightning, I was a fuzzy-brained college kid who thought she had forever to fix the world. I had a vague notion that maybe I'd help reverse global warming. But after..." Zettler frowned at her place setting. "Do you know the Gospel of Thomas?"

"I know *of* it," Chaz replied. This was probably not the time to say that things with "Gospel" in the name made him nervous.

Zettler drew a long breath and quoted, "'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.' After the lightning, that was in my head almost constantly. My classes, my intended career--suddenly they were just noise. They didn't mean anything. Life looked so short. And everywhere I turned, I saw people who didn't realize how much good they could do."

"They disappointed you?" Hafidha asked. She sounded as if she approved.

"No, more like *I* was disappointing *them*. I wasn't helping, you see. That's when I realized my job was to bring out that potential in them. I dropped out, dreamed up Evil Science and pitched it, and I just...steamrollered myself into a whole new life."

"After wanting to fix global warming, 'kid's show host' seems like a pretty self-effacing career," Chaz offered.

Zettler grinned. "You think? PBS is negotiating to pick up Evil Science for national broadcast. Think of me as Big Bird with dry ice, and try saying 'self-effacing' again."

Hafidha nodded. "And you teach kids science."

"I get kids *hooked* on science. I'm making more scientists. I'm Bill Nye with natural hair. I can't think of a better way to save the world." She drained her beer, then glanced at Chaz. "The downside is friends and lovers have trouble keeping up with me now."

Don't assume she's suggesting anything, Chaz thought. *She's just trying to be helpful. Maybe.* He handed her the list of names Thorne had given Lau. "Do you recognize any of these names?"

Suze glanced at them, blinked, then said, "James McAvoy. The local weather guy?"

"Do you know him?"

"Jim and I dated for a couple of years."

"When was this?"

"There was a disastrous one-night stand before the lightning. Then after, he helped out a lot, and I thought I'd misjudged him. But it turned out my instincts were right. What Jim loved was being loved. When I got Evil Science off the ground, our paths diverged."

"He accepted that?" Hafidha asked.

"After a lot of late-night phone calls begging me to give him another chance. I

remembered the definition of insanity and didn't succumb."

"Boys," said Hafidha, and Suze laughed, because she must have missed the undertone that Chaz caught.

He said, "What can you tell us about McAvoy?"

"He's kind of a human Collie. Nice cheekbones, very friendly, and extremely needy. His favorite subjects are weather, television, and running."

"Would he want to harm Thorne?"

Zettler poked the sheet of paper before them with a silver fingernail. "That's a list of people who want to harm Russ? If it was 'see him harmed', the list's too short. If it's 'harm him', it's too long. No one takes Russ seriously enough to want to hurt him."

"Including McAvoy?"

"Well." She looked down, then shrugged. "When Jim was starting in TV, he interviewed Russ, and Russ treated him like a pretty face who couldn't understand words with more than two syllables. It made Jim internet-infamous."

"We saw the video," Hafs said. "Thorne was heavy then. Did he lose weight after he was stuck?"

Suze nodded. "He became a fitness nut. People say he was in love with his mind before, and now he's two-timing it with his body."

"And McAvoy? Was he always a lean love machine?"

Suze smiled. "One of the things Jim and I shared was a love of exercise. Running, dance, pretty much anything you can name. Burning calories wasn't a problem."

Chaz looked at Hafidha, who shrugged.

Chaz said, "You climb?"

Suze smiled. "Trad or sport? There's good crags around here. We should go out sometime."

"We should," Chaz said, resolutely ignoring the double entendre. "So can I ask you a personal question?"

"Why stop now?"

"Were there neurological effects from your lightning strike? Like, what's his name, the Lightning Sonata guy--"

Hafidha raised her eyebrows at Chaz's pretense of absentmindedness. She knew perfectly well that every conversation they'd had with Daphne about various unpredictable neurological effects was sealed in his memory, including the one about the lightning-struck mathematician who had woken up with the drive to become a pianist.

"Tony Cicoria," Suze filled in without hesitation. She got thoughtful. "I got a lot more focused afterward, I guess. It was clarifying. I wanted to stop preparing to live and start living, I guess." She pursed her lips and nodded. "Start living. Right away."

The waiter brought a tray with enough food for six hungry adults. Chaz's nose told him he could luxuriate for hours in the smell of hickory smoke and barbecue sauce. His stomach told him he should grab the tray from the waiter and bury his head in it.

Hafs pointed at the space in front of her. "You can unload that here. And bring another order of cornbread."

Zettler glanced sideways at her, and Chaz said quickly, "You wish."

"I do wish. Okay, let the peons have their plates. But I am prepared to throw myself on another order of cornbread."

Chaz took a bite of chicken, then announced, "This is not to die for. This is to kill for."

There was little talk during dinner. Most of the praise for the food came as moans of pleasure. Suze asked for two ribs and a chicken leg to be put in a go-box. After Chaz and Hafidha cleared their plates, Hafidha said, "I cannot eat another bite. So I'm only having one slice of sweet potato pie. Anyone who tries to steal any will be stabbed. Do *not* think I'm joking."

"The question," Suze said, "is whether you have it with coffee or milk."

Chaz said, "C. Both."

"Wise man."

After dessert, Suze excused herself and went to the women's room. Hafidha told Chaz, "You like her."

"Which probably means she's a lesbian."

"Oh, don't be like that, baby brother. She could be emotionally unavailable in some other way."

He laughed, but it felt like a tight fit getting out of his throat. He was relieved when Suze returned.

Hafidha stood, held out her hand to stop him as he began to rise, and said, "Chaz, I know you were hoping to stop at a club or a coffee house before getting back to the hotel, but I should crash early. Very sorry."

He opened his mouth to say he hadn't hoped any such thing so she couldn't possibly know it.

But Hafidha had already turned to Zettler. "Would you be up for taking him someplace fun? He can catch a cab, so you wouldn't be stuck with delivery afterward, and as long as you don't bring up science fiction movies, he's decent company."

"Hey!" said Chaz, before he caught the look in Hafidha's eye.

Zettler's gaze settled on Chaz. "Do you mind if I explain why the best movie ever would be Sherlock Holmes vs. Iron Man?"

"Because Robert Downey Jr. would play both parts?"

"Leaving out Benedict Cumberbatch, or as I prefer to call him, my future husband? Are you mad?"

Hafidha said, "Don't worry about calling Nikki. I'll report to her when I get back."

As Hafidha darted out of the restaurant, Chaz said, "She made up that bit about the plans."

Zettler smiled. "Doesn't take a profiler to figure that out."

He should have left with Hafidha. A realization that could only be filed in the next-time box. It would have been the most professional choice. "So you really don't have to entertain me."

"No, I really don't have to." Her handsome two-person face shared a crooked little smile. "That makes me a volunteer."

But work was over for the day. His next professional obligation was to meet the team in the morning for breakfast. He felt profoundly shy, and was surprised at how normal his voice sounded when he said, "Thank you, Ms. Zettler."

"Dear God," she said. "Call me Suze, or I'll take you to a three-hour French film."

Act III

When Lau's phone blurted the opening chords of Beethoven's Fifth on its little speaker, she scooped it off the table top and skidded her finger across the

screen. "What's up, Hafs?"

Hafidha's voice in her ear was unusually velvety. "Interview finished, boss-dear. My part, anyway. Wanna take my briefs?"

Lau glanced quickly around the hotel bar, then remembered no one but her had heard. "Do I want to what? Oh! Debriefing. Do you *wear* briefs?"

"Are those boy-shorts things still briefs?"

"Heaven only knows. Do you need dinner?"

Lau could hear her thinking about it. "D'you know, I really don't. I just ate almost enough barbeque. Booze, though--want to meet me in the bar?"

Lau grinned and looked toward the dark-wood-and-glass double doors. "Great minds," she said, and had the satisfaction of seeing Hafidha start as she stepped through them and spotted Lau at a table.

Hafidha pointed at a server, then gave him the Lawrence-Fishburne-in-*The-Matrix* bring-it sign. He followed her to the table, looking no more anxious than was reasonable.

"So," Lau said, "Was that your charisma score at work, or your Chaotic Neutral mind control?"

"Mind control is Chaotic Evil, my little bon-bon." Hafidha turned to the server. "One beer, the darkest you've got. One Irish coffee with whiskey *and* Bailey's. And one mojito."

"You're expecting someone else?" the server asked as he wrote the order.

"Nope," Hafidha replied, slung her bag over the chair across from Lau, and dropped into it.

The server backed away warily.

"Tell me the mojito, at least, is mine," Lau said.

"Well, duh. It would taste awful with beer and Irish coffee." Hafidha leaned back in her chair, interlaced her fingers, and stretched her arms out before her, like a pianist preparing to solo. "So, we made a few inches of progress. Nothing that screams we have a case, but the hints are piling up. After Thorne was struck and before Suze was, he hit on her at a party. She told him the answer was In His Dreams. People get killed for less. One scenario is he went gamma, lightninged a few people, and got himself under control when she seemed to be in a solid relationship. When that relationship ended and she still didn't come to him, he started crispy-crittering again. The gaps in the lightning deaths fit."

"There's a second scenario?"

"Jim McAvoy, weatherguy, and Suze Z. were the couple in question. Another way to assemble the narrative is McAvoy nearly killed Thorne, then he and Suze had a brief thang, she dumped him, he tried to kill her and failed, then felt all guilty about it, which she interpreted as wooing. They got together for a couple of comfortable years, and there were no strange lightning deaths. Then she dumped his skinny ass, and soon after, the lightning got selective again."

"Reyes and I have two scenarios, too."

Hafidha pointed at her ears. "Ready."

"In one, a gamma's killing people he sees as threats. Except for the mail carrier, these were all exceptional people. Maybe we just don't know what was exceptional about her."

"What's your other?"

"It's more a stretch. Would you say the victims, other than the mail carrier and the geology student, could've been betas?"

"It's not like Chaz or I have beta-dar. But I don't know anything to rule it out. You think the gamma strangler has stepped up his game by teaming up with Thor?"

"Think so? No. Have to entertain the notion? Yeah, kind of."

Hafidha said, "Now I really need a drink."

Nikki said, "There's still nothing to support any theory. Reyes hasn't found anything incriminating about Thorne or McAvoy."

"I'll bring full cyber fu on them in the morning. Nik?"

"Yeah?"

"If I did thank-yous, I'd thank you for sending me out with Chaz." The bug whispered, *She was only testing you,* but Hafidha ignored it.

"Hah," said Nikki. "I thought Zettler would like the two of you. So where's Chaz?"

"I hooked him up with our interview subject."

Lau's elbow missed the tabletop as it came down, and her forearm banged painfully against the table edge. "Hafs, tell me you're kidding. Because ethically questionable much."

"Honey, I don't think he's going to conduct a warrantless search." Hafidha's

eyebrows pinned themselves to each other over her nose. She was annoyed, and Lau wondered why.

"You're right. He knows where the line is."

"And if he didn't?" Hafidha leaned forward, glaring. "Think of his awesome private time. Since they let me out of Arkham, he's been my live-in prison guard. That's his personal life. Forgetting for a minute how I feel about that, it's the opposite of natural for Chazzie to not have had a date since whenthefuckever."

Lau concentrated on her breath, to make sure she didn't answer too quickly. Finally she said, "How *do* you feel about it?"

Hafidha blinked. "Shitty. But we knew that going in, and nothing's changed."

Which was when the server brought their drinks. Lau took the enforced pause to weigh Hafidha's response, and decided it was both honest and sufficient.

Hafidha's coffee had whiskey, Bailey's, *and* whipped cream. She slurped from the edge of the mug and licked away the resulting cream moustache. "And what did you do with Dad?"

"Reyes's calling his daughter, then reading files until they put him to sleep."

"It's sad to see the old warrior slow down."

"How do you think the old warrior becomes the *brujo*?"

"Or how he becomes a guy who dies in bed."

Lau poked her mint leaves with the swizzle stick. Too sweet, but not bad for a hotel bar. "Apparently, death isn't the only way out of this job. Who knew?"

"Mmm. Depends on what you mean by 'out.'" Hafs finished her coffee and reached for the beer. "I'm pretty sure Mom was promised a career boost for taking on the WTF. But now the Bureau knows somebody has to do the job Reyes was doing, and there's no one else to do it. Result: she's got a nice set of concrete career overshoes. I mean, have *you* thought about your upgrade path?"

When Lau joined the BAU, she'd had a plan. When she joined the ACTF, she could still see that plan from where she stood. Now... What she saw was a growing pattern of knowledge about the anomaly, possibilities for controlling its spread and identifying people affected by it, ways to improve law enforcement's response. What she couldn't see was herself separate from that. Hafidha was right: the job needed doing, and they were the only ones to do it. She took a sip of her drink. "How about you?"

Hafidha set her beer on the table and rested her chin in her hands. She wore

the crooked smile Lau had learned to be wary of. "Dearie, you forget: I owe my soul to the company store. They can't let me quit."

Lau felt as if she'd swallowed a very large ice cube. Hafidha couldn't be allowed to quit, because she was a gamma. Or was it because she carried the anomaly, whatever she did with it?

And if the latter was true, did it apply to Chaz as well?

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "I never thought about that."

Hafidha shrugged. "I bet they'll let me have a plastic rocking chair in Arkham. Now, not to freak you out, but two guys at the bar have been checking you out since I came in, and one of them is dragging the other this way right now."

The dragger was tall and slim, and his scalp was shaved and glossy. In the low light, his handlebar moustache looked nearly indigo. He wore black combat boots, black jeans, and a burgundy shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show muscled, heavily-tattooed arms.

The draggee was a shorter, sturdy-looking man in an olive green polo shirt, faded blue jeans, and brown hiking boots. His hair, the color of damp sand or dry earth, was long enough to curl over his ears and collar.

"This'll be fun," Hafidha chirped.

"Oh, gawd," Lau groaned into her mojito.

"Good evening, ladies," said the taller man. Lau watched his gaze travel from her to Hafidha, then back to her as he said, "My buddy and I would like to buy both you a refill."

"No, thanks, we're fine," Lau said, just as Hafidha answered, "How lovely! Thank you!"

Lau could see the challenge in Hafidha's smile. With all the finality she could bring to the words, Lau said. "But we have an early work day tomorrow. Sorry."

"Just one drink. You don't even have to finish it." The taller man grinned at Hafidha, then at Lau, which showed the bright white teeth under his moustache. Lau had a sudden disconcerting vision of him in a dentist's chair with a mouth full of whitening tray. "My name's Dave. This is Kyle."

"And we're *really* sorry to bother you," Kyle said. The hand he laid on his companion's shoulder had a determined tilt. "Come on, Dave. We've got an early day ourselves."

Kyle's apology was distributed between her and Hafidha. His voice was softer than Dave's.

Is this the Game version of good cop, bad cop? Lau wondered. After years of experience, she could usually spot guys with Hot Exotic Chick fantasies, and Dave set off the detectors. *And you didn't always have the sense to take it as a warning,* she scolded herself.

"Time for a nice, restful nightcap, then," Hafidha said. She hooked a toe in the rungs of a chair from the next table and slid it up behind Dave. "Sit," she ordered, and flagged their server.

"Hafs," Lau said, and put a warning in it.

"What? Working hours are over. Don't you trust me?" Hafidha made a cartoon sad face. But Lau heard the edge in the question.

If Chaz hadn't trusted her, he'd be here right now. Chaz knew her better than anyone. "I trust you to take care of your own hangover."

"Hangovers are for lesser mortals." Hafidha wiggled her eyebrows at Lau. She turned to Dave. "How about you? Fresh as a daisy in the morning? You look like a man with stamina."

Lau considered covering her face with her cocktail napkin.

Over Dave's head, she met Kyle's eyes. Brown eyes, with dense lashes and eyebrows darker than his hair. His mouth was flattened with exasperation, but she could still see the complex curves and peaks of his upper lip line. "Sorry," he mouthed.

"Are you ladies locals?" Dave asked.

"Strangers in town," Hafidha purred. "And I'm stranger than most. But don't let that scare you."

"Do I look easy to scare? Ask Kyle. He's seen me do some crazy shit."

Kyle gazed at the corner of the room, as if he weren't listening. But Lau heard him mutter, "And that's actually true."

"Oh, I believe you," Hafidha said. Lau was pretty sure she meant the same sort of thing Kyle did.

Kyle looked from Dave to Hafidha and back. Then he reached blindly for the nearest chair and sat. It put him between Dave and Lau, but Dave didn't seem to notice.

Lau raised her nearly-empty glass to Kyle and winced.

"Do you play darts?" Hafidha asked Dave. "Of course you do. I bet you have lovely hand-eye coordination."

Even in bar-light, Lau saw him flush. "I'm pretty good."

Hafidha narrowed her eyes and rose. "Come show a girl your moves, then." Dave half-turned toward Lau, but Hafidha added, "No, darts isn't made for threesomes. Besides, you'll have much more fun with me." She curled her index finger, slowly.

Dave blinked, stood up, and followed her without a backward glance.

"She won't hurt him," Lau murmured. "I don't think."

"He's not really a jerk." Kyle sagged in his chair. "I mean, I guess he is. But only with-- Yeah, he's a jerk."

"Friend of yours?"

"Co-worker. U.S. Forest Service."

"I wouldn't have thought there was that much forest in Pittsburgh."

He looked grave. "They let us into civilization once a year." He broke into a smile, and Lau admired his upper lip again. "We're surveying heat-stressed woodland all over western P.A. This is our night off between national forests."

"Are they usually like this, your nights off?"

His lids dropped, and his smile went a little crooked. "Usually I'd be home with my boys. It's my first trip out of town...in a year."

Lau heard the constraint in his voice, and saw the way his hands moved in his lap, as if they wanted to reach for something that wasn't there. "You lost your wife. I'm sorry."

He looked up, startled. "Yeah. I... Yeah. We're doing pretty well, though." His grin broke out, and Lau wished she knew the details of the memory that caused it. "The boys even got me to put up my profile on OKCupid."

She laughed. "How old are they?"

"Jim is ten, and Sean is eight. Damn, I knew I'd miss them, but not like this. Do you have kids?"

"Divorced, no kids. You know, you're a terrible wingman."

Kyle laughed. "If I ever went into sales, I'd need to believe in my product."

Hafidha swept out of the back room. "All right, then. I've invited Mr. Dave up to my room, where I plan to ride him like a pony."

Kyle blushed ferociously.

"Don't embarrass the neighbors," Lau said, and hoped she looked as calm as she sounded. "And don't sleep through breakfast."

Hafidha hooked her bag off the chair and slung it over her shoulder. "Of course not, sweetie. I'm counting on muffins. Have fun, kids. Don't do anything I et cetera."

She left the bar with Dave close behind. The silence in her wake was awkward.

"I really do have to get up early," Lau started, just as Kyle said, "I'd better call it a night." After a moment, he gave a stiff chuckle, and she smiled.

"Thanks," she said, and put out her hand. "It's been bizarrely fun."

He shook it. His palm was warm and dry, scratchy with calluses. "It really has. Safe travels."

"You, too."

She stared at her wavy reflection in the brushed-steel panels of the elevator as it climbed to her floor. She didn't fall for nice guys. She just didn't. So this faintly hollow feeling wasn't that.

Because if she started dating a nice guy, and it all fell apart, how would she convince herself it wasn't her fault?

She swiped her key card in the lock, stepped into the cool, silent, cleanser-scented room, and pulled out her phone to call the office.

*

Chaz did not pay attention to the apartment. He noticed a faint smell of incense, pine, and cat box, the clutter of paper or clothes on every surface that suggested *overworked* rather than *hoarder*, a purple ukulele, a white-and-brown cat named Mehitabel who had no interest in either of them after it had been fed, and a double bed with a purple cotton cover.

"I've got scars," Suze said apologetically.

Chaz looked at her. His eyes flicked away, then back. Methodically, he unbuttoned both shirt cuffs. Methodically, he rolled them up. He held his wrists out, a little above waist level.

As if she knew what he was about, she held his gaze anyway, until he said, "Look."

He didn't, watching the top of her head instead, but he knew what she saw: keloid scars on both wrists, around the bones where the manacles had galled. Worse on the right wrist, where the cast had impeded treatment.

"There's more where those came from," he said, when she looked up again.

She reached out and--very slowly, very definitely--took hold of Chaz's tie.

And then she leaned forward and--very slowly, very definitely--put her mouth on his.

Through the thunder in his ears, he somehow remembered to keep his hands at his sides, his tongue in his head.

When it ended, he opened his eyes and said, "This could get me fired."

"Then we'll have to make it worth the risk," she answered.

This was a terrible idea. Possibly the worst one he'd ever had. And he already knew he wasn't going to resist it: adrenaline junkie, celibate way too long. And he knew Hafidha knew it, too. She'd set him up to fail.

The mirror turned in Chaz's head. Questing. Wondering. He swallowed it, shoved it down. *The ethical empath.*

He unbuttoned Suze's shirt and followed her scars down, across her collarbones to the logical conclusions. The scars were dendritic, treelike. Barklike, in places--ridged and gnarled. Catastrophic, down her shoulder and across her right breast.

"Lichtenberg figures," he said.

She chuckled. "You know what to say to a girl." And pushed his head back down.

*

Brady put his feet up on his desk and rolled his head back, trying to ease the strain. Gray's phone was going to voicemail, and if he couldn't get a neck rub, he at least wanted to hear the man's voice. *What happened to the footloose Casanova of yesteryear?*

Todd looked up at his sigh. Brady glowered at him, and said, "Don't you have a home to go to?"

Brady did. But it didn't feel much like home when Gray was out of town.

"Why, so you can more conveniently sleep on the couch?" Todd scoffed. "I'll go when Nikki calls in. And you should go too."

"What, when there's still coffee?" Brady picked up his mug, braced himself for horror, and took a long illustrative slurp, then found himself startled when the substance inside was hot and fresh. He frowned at it. "Um. Thank you."

"For what?" Todd was frowning over a column of numbers, his glasses slipping down his nose and what little hair he had left fallen askew. He looked like a man whose neck had never felt the inside of a necktie.

"Coffee?" Brady asked.

"You already brought me some." Todd did look up now, puzzled.

"No, you made some," Brady said, holding up his mug. "And you brought it to me. Didn't you?"

"Now you're sleepwalking," Todd said. "You made it and brought it to me." He gestured vaguely at the kitchenette. "My butt hasn't been off this sofa for so long I'm starting to ache. In fact..." He stood up, stretched, and wandered to the kitchenette.

Brady called after him, over the clatter of bowls, "Hey Duke--"

"You want something?"

"A life that turns out like I expect it?"

His answer came back with a chuckle. "You're asking that from a guy who once woke up to discover a tornado had lifted the roof off the barn he was sleeping in."

When Todd came back, he had a bowl of one of his mysterious, pepper-sauce-slathered noodle substances in one hand, topped with what looked like raw fish. He poised his chopsticks with the other. "Looks like Chaz left muffins, by the way."

"There are any left? I would have thought the ghosts of jammers past would have dealt with that little problem by now."

"Ghosts never steal my food," Todd said complacently.

"That's because you eat natto--"

The hall door opened, revealing Falkner, blinking slightly. The corridors were dimmed for night, to conserve electricity.

Todd said, "Aren't you furloughed?"

"I forgot my coat. Aren't you retired?"

He shrugged, held up the bowl. "Just stopped by for dinner."

They grinned at one another, and the main office phone rang. Falkner lifted it without hesitating. "ACTF." Then, "So do we think it's good?"

She hit "speaker" as Lau was saying, "...think it's good. Well, we think it's a gamma. *Good,* that's..."

"Yeah," Falkner said. "So we start interviewing the families of the dead?"

"In the morning," Lau said.

"Be careful out there," Brady said. "Weather report has it raining shotgun

slugs, starting about noontime."

*

The hotel's pool opened at 5:30 a.m., which would let Nikki swim hard for fifteen minutes and leave enough time to be the first of the team at breakfast. Wearing a hotel robe and carrying a towel over one arm, she followed the signs down the hall, thinking about conductivity and hoping this case would prove to be one of too few where they found nothing but coincidence.

A man in orange flip-flops, red swimming trunks, and a brown T-shirt was bent over in a sun salutation in the hall in front of the pool door. As he rose, she recognized Kyle.

"Oh," he said, studying her face. "Were you hoping to have the pool to yourself?"

She nodded.

"I'll come back later."

"Seriously? Don't be ridiculous. I'm too Californian to even consider that."

"California? We vacationed there two years ago. The beach, the wine and apple country-- They were great. But Yosemite was the best."

"I feel like a traitor for admitting this. For the most amazing scenery, you want southern Utah."

"Definitely!" His smile was so pure that Nikki smiled, too. "We hit Zion, Bryce, Arches--" His expression faltered, long enough that she knew what he was remembering, then returned, as strong as before. "A month in the southwest really isn't enough. The boys want to go back."

"You should."

He nodded. "You're right. It'd be good for them--for us." He glanced away. Then she realized he had heard the approach of a hotel clerk before she had. They stood in awkward silence as the woman opened the pool door and turned on the lights. Entering the quiet pool room, he said, "Well. Have a good trip back to California."

"I'm a DC gal now."

"Is it home?"

She frowned, then realized it was true as she said, "Yes."

"What brought you to Pittsburgh?"

"Work."

"You say that like it matters, not like it's a paycheck."

She smiled. "The paycheck's fine, but you're right."

"You're a politician."

She laughed. "Bzzt! Guess again."

"You're not? I'd vote for you. You've got this smart, concerned thing going--"

She rolled her eyes.

"You're not a lawyer."

"Why not?"

"Oh, you could be a lawyer for the Sierra Club or the ACLU or something that mattered to you. But I'm guessing not."

"You're right. I'm with the FBI."

He grinned.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm going to tell the boys I met an FBI agent, and they're going to think that's so cool. Because it is." Before she could decide what to say to that, he said, "My regular station's the Delaware Water Gap. Places on the river aren't as dramatic as the southwest, but when you're there, you don't want to be anyplace else." He smiled again in his self-deprecating way. "I am prejudiced. But if you ever want some suggestions about good places to hike or canoe, let me know. Kyle Nybaek. N-y-b-a-e-k. I would answer an OKCupid message from you in a flash."

"You don't know my name."

"If your photo looks like you, that's no problem." He pursed his lips, then said, "Can I have a take-back on that and just ask what your name is?"

She smiled. "Nikki Lau. L-a-u."

*

Crossing the lobby, Reyes glanced through the front doors as movement caught his eye. Chaz Villette popped out of a silver Smart Car driven by a dark woman with high cheekbones and a wide smile. Chaz ran toward the hotel, then slowed at the door and smoothed his tie, grinning in a way that made Reyes feel guilty for watching and glad that he had.

Chaz spotted him and raised an eyebrow.

"She likes you," Reyes said roughly. It was calculated harshness, they both

knew. Reyes never had uncalculated moments. No. He had them with Autumn, and he needed to let himself have them more often. He was retired. Was it possible to retire from pushing every human encounter toward a goal?

He added, "She watched you run from the car before she drove away."

It did what Reyes had intended: Chaz found his voice. "I like her."

Reyes held eye contact and said, "Be smart, Villette."

Chaz sighed. "Cassandra Martin. Ph.D." But he couldn't hold Reyes's gaze; his head twisted down and to the side.

Reyes smiled. "I said be smart," he said. "I didn't say don't do it."

Lau was at a table for four, sipping coffee and looking away, watching nothing through the window. Her phone lay on the table, entirely ignored. Reyes wondered if that meant anything, but when she glanced at them, she was entirely the agent-in-charge, so he decided it didn't mean anything important.

"Yes!" Chaz said, sitting and grabbing one of the three cups of coffee that were waiting for them.

Hafidha arrived while Reyes was pouring hot water over his tea bag. Green, because restaurants never served the water hot enough for black. Lau had her own brand of consideration, but Reyes thought she'd learned this kind from Falkner. What he felt wasn't grief; it just stung like it.

Stopping by her chair but not sitting down, Hafidha said, "Hold the applause. This morning, I checked out James McAvoy. During the two year gap between potential victims in Pittsburgh, he had a weather gig in L.A. Also during that time, Luis Arcos, a TV news helicopter pilot, was hit by lightning while he was running between the chopper and the hangar. Survived, but the nerve damage grounded him. And, yes, he flew for the station where McAvoy worked."

"Does that mean we don't like Thorne anymore?" Lau asked.

"It means maybe we look at McAvoy too?" Chaz said.

They trailed off, staring at one another across the table, Chaz tapping his fingers distractedly.

Picking up her coffee, Hafidha said, "Silence can be better than applause."

Reyes stood. "Breakfast waits." Then he bit the inside of his cheek as everyone looked at Lau.

She nodded and stood. "Damn straight."

Act IV

They took both SUVs. Reyes, riding with Nikki, said, "If I did anything to undermine you--"

She made the corner, a careful five miles over the speed limit while wishing they had a police liaison on this case. "If you'd been a tenth of a second slower, Chaz probably would've said it. You never ran things with an iron hand. We don't, either."

"I think I know why Esther sent me."

"Because you really wanted to go?"

"Because I needed to see that the team's fine without me." When she looked at him, he said, "It'll be fine without Esther when the time comes, too."

James McAvoy's condo had a quiet lobby with a marble floor, red oak paneling, and a doorman who studied their FBI badges and clearly didn't know whether they were authentic, but also knew four urgent people in dark suits saying "this could be a matter of life or death" should be given some benefit of doubt. He led them upstairs, saying, "Mr. McAvoy's never troubled anyone. Perfect gentleman. I hope this is nothing."

"So do we," said Chaz.

Nikki pressed McAvoy's doorbell, then knocked, then told the doorman to use his passkey.

McAvoy's condo had the impersonal feeling of the place that a busy, prosperous, single person only saw shortly before and after sleeping. The only thing that said this was not a furnished apartment that rented by the week was a case with professional awards and photos of McAvoy, smiling broadly with his arms around people with immaculate suits and perfect hair like his. Only one photo showed anyone with ruffled hair, as he and Suzanne Zettler crouched on the top floor of a building during a wind storm and grinned as if they were ecstatic. Looking at it, Nikki had the same sense of a familiar place she'd gotten at the Carnegie Mellon campus. A couple of television personalities... maybe it was a location from a movie?

The glass front of the case had been shattered by two bullets after they passed through James McAvoy's heart and lungs. He lay in front of his mementos, his face blank, his eyes dull, his robe and pajamas dark with his blood.

The doorman gasped and turned ashen. Nikki gestured for him to be silent and step back into the hall. The team swept the apartment, declared it clean, then gathered around McAvoy.

Touching the body was her call, so Nikki put a finger to McAvoy's wrist, then lifted it slightly. "Room temperature. Possible signs of rigor."

Hafidha said, "He did the ten o'clock show last night."

Chaz said, "For the record, I was with Suzanne Zettler until Reyes saw me come in this morning."

Reyes met his glance and nodded.

Nikki went to the hall and asked the doorman, "When did your shift start?"

"Midnight, ma'am."

"When did McAvoy return?"

"About two a.m. Same as usual."

"Did he have any visitors?"

"Yes, ma'am. A black gentleman, maybe fifty years old, stopped by maybe half an hour after Mr. McAvoy came home. He said Mr. McAvoy was expecting him, and when I called up, Mr. McAvoy said he was. The gentleman stayed about ten minutes, I'd say."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Yes, ma'am. He had a tic in one hand. Can't forget that."

"Thank you. Please go downstairs, call the police and say there's been a homicide, then wait for their arrival."

When the doorman left, Nikki told Chaz, "I don't think your time with Zettler needs to be for the record," and saw his shoulders loosen. Then they tightened again. Nikki said, "What?"

"If Thorne's going after people who wronged him, Suze could be next." He held up his phone, and as soon as Nikki nodded, he tapped the screen and held the phone before him.

Zettler's voice was loud enough for them all to hear. "Evil science for a better tomorrow. Hey, Chaz--"

"You're on speaker," he said quickly. "Have you seen Russell Thorne today?"

"No." All hint of flirtation was gone. "Why?"

"McAvoy's dead. Thorne was the last known person to see him alive. There's a chance he'll come after you. Where are you?"

"The studio."

"Is there a security person there?"

"Yes."

"Go to him and call the police. Tell whoever's in charge to lock the doors and not let anyone in until they arrive. I'm on my way." He clicked off his phone and looked at Nikki.

"Go. Hafs can ride with us."

Hafidha tossed him the car keys as he ran out the door.

Nikki, looking at the body, said, "We need a new scenario."

Hafidha said, "Thorne's the gamma. He used a pistol because there wasn't a thunderstorm and he wanted to keep his hands clean. Chaz is right to be worried about Suze, but whether Thorne wants love or revenge--"

"He could be tidying up loose ends," Reyes said. "This killing was impulsive. The pilot who survived the lightning in L.A.--"

"Luis Arcos," Hafidha said.

Nikki said, "We'll get protection for him. And we'll get word to the airports here."

Reyes said, "Or this could just be an all-too-common love triangle."

Nikki said, "Then we'll help catch an all-too-common killer. What?"

"We're missing something. I want to talk to Amelia Weber's parents. If we can figure out why Thorne was interested in her--"

Nikki handed him the keys to the other SUV. "I'll work with the police while Hafs coordinates the hunt. Good luck. And please tell me your weather knee isn't acting up?"

"Sorry," he said. "You know I'm trying to avoid lying to you."

*

As Chaz drove to WQED Multimedia, Hafidha sent updates that he checked at red lights, so he had half-a-dozen photos of Russell Thorne burned in his memory and knew that Thorne drove a 2011 silver Lexus.

Which was why the cold suppression of his fear for Suze grew colder when he saw a slim black man in a late-model silver Lexus parked on Clyde Street near the intersection with Fifth, where he might have been innocently reading a tablet while he had a perfect view of the front of WQED.

Chaz parked on the opposite side of Clyde, next to the Catholic Byzantine

church. A police car was parked in WQED's lot. Thorne's presence meant he was arrogant enough to believe he could watch without being caught, or desperate enough to think he had to act despite the police presence.

Chaz looked up at the gray sky. Was Thorne waiting for thunder?

Chaz unholstered his service weapon, double-checked the safety, and slipped it into his jacket pocket. The glove compartment held a map of Pittsburgh. He stepped out of the car as he unfolded it, then looked up and down from the map to the church. How natural did he look? Would theatre be better if actors knew a bad performance could get them killed?

He turned around. Thorne watched WQED. His left hand, holding his tablet, rested on the steering wheel. It may have trembled, or Chaz may have expected it to. His right was beside him. In Thorne's place, Chaz would hold his pistol or have it within easy reach. Thorne had been in the army. There was no way to rush him. If Chaz called for backup, a show of force might make Thorne surrender.

Or it might make him choose suicide by cop.

And with every moment that Chaz waited, the skies grew darker.

The map tore itself against his fingers as he held it open with both hands. Chaz crossed the street toward Thorne, grinning appeasingly. He called, "Excuse me! Either the rental company gave me an old map, or I'm completely turned around. Are there two Clyde Streets in Pittsburgh?"

Thorne gave him a withering look, said, "No," then said reluctantly, "What're you looking for?" He did not lower his window. His right hand was empty, but anything could be under the messenger bag on the passenger seat or on the shelf by the steering wheel.

Chaz thought, *Okay. He's sane enough not to want to attract attention. Which just makes him a different kind of dangerous.* Chaz lowered the map, put his hand in his suit pocket, and said, "If this is Clyde and Fifth, WQED should be here. Shouldn't it?"

Thorne rolled his eyes and pointed with a trembling finger across Fifth. "It's right ov--"

Chaz brought his pistol out of his pocket, turned his hand, and drove the butt against the window. Safety glass sprayed inward. He grabbed Thorne's shirtfront and yanked, pulling the man's head and shoulders through the shattered window until Thorne's seatbelt jerked taut. Even jammer strength might not be enough to break it, and definitely not without hurting Thorne--so Chaz slammed Thorne downward, pinning him against the door. At the same moment, he swept the mirror open, sharp and hard--

They must be stopped. I have to stop them. They think they're gods, gods of thunder. They think they own the weather--

The mirror--or the blow--dazed Thorne. The tablet fell from his hand. He flailed, maybe for his pistol, more likely for something to brace himself.

Chaz lifted Thorne slightly to ease the seat belt's tension, then yanked, drawing Thorne through the window and dropping him, jerking his head up at the last moment to keep it from hitting the pavement, but not caring that Thorne landed heavily on one shoulder.

"FBI!" he shouted for Thorne's sake and anyone within earshot. "Stay down! Hands behind your back! Now! Russell Thorne, you are under arrest for the murder of James McAvoy."

For a long second, he wondered what he would do if Thorne resisted. But the man grunted and obeyed.

*

When their taxi arrived at Fifth and Clyde, Hafidha and Nikki found Chaz, six cops, and a small crowd of onlookers. In the back of one cruiser, Russell Thorne sat motionless with Chaz's jacket tied over his head.

As Hafidha and Nikki approached, Chaz said, "He's in our handcuffs, which should hold him, but I doubt he needs his hands free to call lightning. He's heard a Miranda."

All three glanced up. The clouds were still gathering.

Chaz continued, "We should carry a hood for gammas with sight-based myths. No one's asked why I covered his head yet--there's a big advantage to working for an agency that can do just about anything on TV--but they will."

"It's for his safety," Nikki said. "We can use the witness protection excuse to carry him away."

"He's not talking."

"Yet," Nikki noted.

Chaz glanced at the WQED building.

"Hey," Hafidha said. "Do you think she's insecure about her expertise as well?"

Chaz groaned. "I don't think she's insecure about *anything*."

Nikki smiled. "If you want to check on her, go. We'll start the mountain of paperwork without you."

When he grinned, Hafidha thought, *No one's happier than a happy coyote,* and said, "Try not to leap and bound as you go."

*

Thick drops of rain had begun to spatter and the wind was rising as Reyes pressed the front bell of a large brown American Craftsman cottage.

The man who came to the door only nodded when Reyes said, "Mr. Weber? I'm Stephen Reyes with the FBI. I trust Ms. Gates let you know I was coming."

The house seemed wounded. Its lawn was a few days too long for the Squirrel Hill neighborhood. The house was big, but quiet, which should have been normal on a school and work day, but Peter Weber's hollow eyes would tell anyone something was wrong. He was dressed and shaved, but clearly, he did not know why.

"May I come in?"

Weber stepped aside. Reyes entered a large living room that smelled stale and felt incomplete. Parts of it had been tidied. Others seemed to have been ignored. There was nothing to say a girl had lived here, which told Reyes what was gone.

He suspected he knew the answer to the question he had to ask: "Is your wife here?"

"She's with her relatives. We're taking time--" Weber shook his head. "I don't understand why you're here."

"I was wondering if the name Russell Thorne means anything to you?"

Weber frowned.

Reyes said, "Or Professor Thorne? A black man, middle-aged, short salt-and-pepper hair, fairly thin. Has a tremor in his left hand. Teaches atmospheric science at Carnegie Mellon."

Weber shook his head slowly.

Reyes held out his phone. "I have a few photos."

Weber glanced at them and shook his head again. "No."

"Did Amelia ever say anything about scientists or teachers at the university?"

"No." Then Weber blinked like a man waking, and smiled though his eyes were wet. "Wait. Scientists? She was so excited about getting to meet one."

"At Carnegie Mellon?"

"No. Not a real scientist. She was going to be on Professor Suzi's Evil Science show."

*

Suzanne Zettler walked quickly from WQED. Chaz thought he should say something, but no words seemed right. She stopped in front of him and took his hands in hers. He hadn't realized he was cold until then.

She said, "You're all right."

He nodded, though he knew it wasn't a question. "So're you. Thorne's going to be locked up for years. Maybe the rest of his life."

"What did he want?"

Chaz shook his head. "I know saying this won't help, but don't let him take more of your life. There were people who helped make him what he is, but you're not one of them. You're just what he fastened on because what he needs doesn't exist."

"You'll be going back to DC today?"

"Probably."

She smiled tentatively. "You can catch my show on YouTube."

He laughed. "I will. And I'll be joining your fan club."

"I answer my fan mail. Usually a form letter, but I make an exception for fans with slow hands." She squeezed his hands as she spoke, then looked up at the sky.

He said, "You should head back in."

"I don't melt. I really hated being trapped in there while we waited for your okay."

"They're predicting thunder."

She studied his face, then grinned. "Roy Sullivan was hit seven times, and survived every one."

"Yeah, but--"

"You know, after my brother died, my Mom told me never to let anything scare me or stop me. That has to include lightning." She tugged his hands. "C'mon. Ever kiss in a thunderstorm?"

*

Police Sergeant Lisa Barone drove the squad car. Her commander had

conferred with Lau, then recommended Barone as the best combination of discretion and competence. At the start of the drive, Barone had made a comment about *Men In Black 3*. When Nikki smiled and did not answer, Barone took the hint and continued the drive in silence.

The only sounds were street noise and the patrol radio. In the back, Hafidha watched Thorne, who could not be comfortable belted in, hands cuffed behind him, Chaz's jacket over his head, but still said nothing.

When *Also Sprach Zarathustra* began to play, Nikki pulled out her phone and said, "We have Thorne."

She listened, said, "On it," clicked off the phone, and turned back to Hafidha. "Amelia Weber was going to be on Zettler's show. They had a preparatory meeting before Weber was killed. We're still missing something."

Hafidha glanced at Barone, then said, "Let me talk to Thorne."

Nikki looked at Barone. "This is where you make your reputation for discretion."

Barone nodded once.

Nikki told Hafidha, "Go."

Hafidha said, surprising Nikki with the gentleness of her voice, "Mr. Thorne, I'm going to remove the jacket that's over your head. In return, you're not going to do anything foolish. You think you're alone in a mad world, but you're not."

She untied the arms of the jacket and tugged it off Thorne's head. He shuddered and kept looking straight ahead at nothing.

Hafidha said, "You know things now you can't tell anyone. Some of 'em wouldn't be believed, not by anyone sane. The rest you can't figure out how to tell, because they don't make sense. I get it. I've been down that tunnel, and I'm not all the way out yet, but I'm back, and I learned things. I'll tell you one now. It's the most important. You listening?"

Thorne continued to stare blindly ahead.

Hafidha said, "You can't figure it out alone. We're the blind men with the elephant. We need the rest of the blind men to tell us about the rope and the pillar and the fan and the wall and all the crazy pieces before we can begin to hope to know the elephant. You know a piece of the elephant no one else knows. We know some, too. You can tell us. Because we are the people who will believe you're saying what you know, no matter what you say."

Thorne said softly, "That girl."

"Amelia Weber?"

"They killed her."

"I hear you."

He turned his empty stare to her. "With lightning."

Hafidha nodded.

"You knew?"

"Not enough. Help us."

"You stopped me."

"We fuck up. Help us make it right."

"I thought lightning chose who it wanted. But they *used* it. I told myself I had to be wrong, because if I was right, I was crazy, and now--"

"Yes?"

"I keep watching that little girl's video and knowing I could've stopped them. If I'd just believed the math."

"How do you mean?"

"The math. Where they went, the lightning chose people who should've been passed over."

"Who?"

"McAvoy and Zettler. Math doesn't lie."

Hafidha had a sudden flashbulb memory, a perfect image in her mind of the photo of Zettler and McAvoy from the dead man's apartment. She imagined that this was how Chaz's memories looked to him--crisp and perfect. "Could it've just been Zettler?"

He stared at her. "Then why would she go to him instead of me?"

"Nikki," Hafidha asked, her heart not so much sinking in her chest as shrilling. "Where do you go to learn about television?"

"Aw Jesus," Nikki said.

Act V

On the WQED pathway near Central Catholic High, Chaz shivered, but Suze's arm around his waist made the cold worth it. The trees around them swayed.

The rain seemed heavier and colder.

She said, "You're like me."

"I hope that means you like yourself. A lot."

She laughed. "I do now. That was one of the things the lightning took."

"When you were hit?"

"Yeah."

His shirt was plastered to him. It didn't matter. She had seen his scars. He said, "Nothing like a little mortality to make us appreciate life."

"Uh-uh. Life makes you appreciate life."

"The lightning felt like life?"

"It felt like everything changes in an instant. That's life."

"That doesn't terrify you?"

"Better to be terrified than bored."

"Adrenaline junkie."

"Kettle."

He thought of plunging through the sky. Plunging into her kiss. "It's a living."

"Because you couldn't have been a civil engineer. A statistician."

"Technically speaking, I am a statistician."

"Chaz."

He glanced at her, then said, "A hit. A very palpable hit."

The phone rang with the Wonder Woman TV theme. Chaz said, "'Scuze me. I got to--"

Suze spun out of his grip. "Come!" She turned and ran toward the parking lot and the high school's football field.

Chaz slid his thumb across his phone. "Nikki?" But there was nothing but the pop of a dropped connection. Distant thunder crackled. He hadn't seen the flash.

He shouted "Suze!" and pocketed the phone as he followed. He expected to catch her in a few steps, but she had a good lead and good legs. She ran into the parking lot like a track star--and vanished behind sheets of rain.

*

The foley guy was off a little, but only just. Because Brady's phone started playing Willie Nelson's "(I Don't Have A Reason) To Go To California Anymore" slightly more than a second after Todd, nose down behind his laptop, said, "Whoa. Whoa!"

It was his archive-ferret's voice, and usually he sounded pleased when he made that kind of connection. But just this second, his voice was rich with dread.

"Hold that thought," Brady said. "Nik?"

"We've got a problem," she said.

"I think we've got one here too. You first." He set it to speaker and put it on his desk. Todd had bounded up off the couch and was hovering anxiously beside him.

"Thorne--McAvoy's murderer--is almost certainly not the gamma," Nikki said, her voice almost drowned in a crack of thunder. "Hafs and I both think he's just a garden-variety narcissist with some paranoid tendencies."

"The gamma's Suzanne Zettler," Todd said, leaning over Brady's shoulder. "I'll stake my life on it."

"*Shit*," Nikki said. "Yeah. Chaz is with her, and we can't reach him. Phone or text. Storm, maybe. Or maybe..."

"...Zettler's electromagnetic effects?"

"Yeah... wait. Here comes Wabbit. Hafs?"

Hafidha didn't waste any time with pleasantries. "Tell Todd... I don't believe I'm saying this. Tell Todd to call Chaz's cell from the landline. Sometimes that will get through when cell to cell fails."

Brady wrestled down a sick helpless sensation. "Can you get a fix on Chaz's phone GPS?"

"Intermittent. The storm doesn't help me any. He's..." And Brady could picture her as she closed her eyes. Groping for wireless. He could even imagine the furrow between her brows. "At Central Catholic."

"Get the car," Nikki said. "Call Reyes and have him get down here to ride herd on Thorne. You and me are going after Chaz. Todd, I want to hear dialing. Todd! You need to know. Chaz has a... relationship with this subject."

Todd had already punched "speaker" on Brady's dusty desk phone. He paused, and said quietly, "I understand." Then he punched Chaz's phone number from

memory, and they all waited with strained silence to see if the echoing emptiness of the connection would turn into a ring.

*

Chaz turned in the rain, blinking its sting from his eyes. Shadows--no, just trees whipped almost perpendicular by the lashing wind. His wet clothes rasped and clung. It wasn't a warm rain; his teeth chattered. *Suzi Sue, where are you?*

His phone buzzed again. He didn't hear the ring over the rain and a much closer crack of thunder, but he felt it shake against his thigh. *How much water can an iPhone resist?*

He shielded it with his body. An FBI number--he recognized Brady's desk phone. He tipped his head to protect the phone as much as possible and yelled, "Make it good, Danny!"

"Chaz," Todd said in his ear. "Listen carefully. Are you with Suzanne Zettler?"

"We're playing tag," Chaz said, already knowing. Already sick. "I don't have sight of her right now."

"Chaz, her older half-brother was Mark Degrasso."

Chaz did the math. He couldn't help doing the math.

She would have been thirteen.

"You're sure?"

"He kept his name when their mom remarried. There's paper trail. I'm sure."

"A crack, you mean."

"I mean. First crack. Lightning strike, number two and mythology. She's not the first victim. She's the *jammer*. Thorne's just a guy who got zapped."

Lightning parted heavy clouds, but was only a jeweled flash in the increasing gloom. As if from somewhere else, Chaz heard his own voice. Wry, self-conscious. Gallows humor. Adding, into Todd's continued silence, "As if puberty weren't stressful enough."

He wasn't sure he'd ever heard Todd sound so gentle, or maybe it was just an effect of the thunder. *Two seconds. Really close now*. "See?" Todd said. "That's why we're better than all those other law enforcement agencies. Correct use of the subjunctive. Chaz, get to shelter. Hafidha and Nikki are enroute."

"I can stop her," Chaz said. "I can get her in alive. I'm going after her."

Over Todd's voice, Brady's. Rising. "Chaz, don't do this."

"She won't kill me." Not because he thought she loved him.

Because he wasn't a meteorologist.

"Come back with a story," Todd said. A gentle benediction.

It froze Chaz where he stood, even more than the rain. *I can do this. Sufficient.*

"I will."

*

She won't kill me, Chaz thought, *because I won't fucking find her before both of us drown.* He splashed through puddles, head bowed, eyes blinded by the rain. He regretted the loss of his jacket. He regretted not having worn wool socks even more.

Hafs and Nikki would be there soon. He could almost feel them barreling through traffic, Nikki's hands too calm and sure to drum nervously on the steering wheel while Hafidha reclined beside her, feeling ahead for traffic lights and making sure everything broke their way. He knew it was stupid not to wait for them. Hafidha had a relationship with Suze too--

He thought of the burrow, and he thought of the Bug. Hafidha might not *want* to bring her in alive.

But if he couldn't find Suze in time...

Just as he was about to kick something in frustration, though, he realized where she'd be. And he took off running, hurdling parked cars and a four-foot chain-link fence like it was nothing, scrambling across the tarmac near the football stadium like the Worm Ouroboros.

She was in the end zone, of course. *Touchdown.*

"She won't kill me," he'd told Brady--and now, walking through the rain, his shirt plastered to his shaking body, his hair dripping in his eyes, he wondered why the hell he'd had such a stupid idea.

But he was in it now, and if he died here, at least it wouldn't be one of the others.

Acceptable losses, he thought. Him over Nikki, or Hafidha, or Reyes.

Suze was a black shape in all the grays and blues of the storm. Lightning flashed behind the bleachers, and the thunder rattled after--swift steeds pursued by chariot wheels. The hairs on Chaz's neck prickled; he felt them rise. "Suze."

She turned as he came up to her. Her hair was wild in the rain, its dandelion-puff soaked into coils, but her eyes were wilder and more delighted.

He held out his hands. "You've proved your courage. Let's go back."

She stepped forward and kissed him. She needed it, so he let her, but all he could think was, *Right now, the odds of my being hit by lightning are a whole lot better than 700,000 to one.* His lips tingled with the touch, lightning or not, and he found himself looking at her. The lump inside him swelled.

When they separated, she said, "You're like me."

"Let's talk about this inside."

"You don't have to be afraid," she said. "You're *like me*. So is Hafidha, isn't she?"

"Yes," he said. "We are. We have ways to help you, Suze."

He touched her cheek. She came into his arms, drenched and cold but not shivering. She stood there, and rested her forehead on his shoulder.

The lightning sparked over them again, thunder following less than a second later. Loosening his insides. He looked around for tall objects that might draw a bolt, either towards them or away, but it wasn't football season and the goal posts were down.

She said, "I didn't understand."

He petted her wet hair. The water ran over his fingers, and the hair frizzed up against his palm. He was shivering, if she wasn't. "What?"

"I thought it would change anyone. But it only changes people like us."

"The lightning." There. A glimpse into her mythology. "Were you trying to help them?"

"It's science," she said. "If it doesn't work, you adjust the variables and try again."

"Oh, Suze," he said.

A failure of profiling. A failure of his craft. Because as he said it--involuntarily, a reflex, the sort of thing that happened when you got too close, too involved--her chin came up. And her eyes went wide.

And he knew she heard all the sorrow and grief and affection in his tone, and read it properly.

She shoved herself out of his arms. She wasn't holding back, and while her strength shouldn't have surprised him, she slid away as if greased. He tried to

hold her, and heard only the stretch of fabric before she eeled out of his grasp, wet and panting. Something on her face--

End game, he thought. Then, bitterly: *Well. That was easy.*

The gamma, faced with capture, would try to do just a little more damage. Spread its spores around like one of those plants with the explosive seed pods.

Nevertheless, he held his hands out to her. Softly, as tenderly as he could, he said, "Suze."

The lightning was a constant strobing now, the thunder a rumble like trains in some celestial switchyard. Huge things slid and grated and boomed up in the sky.

Suze glanced up at it and smiled. A sort of smile Chaz recognized--resigned recognition. Acceptance.

He'd seen too many like it. Now the Bug was twisting her neurochemistry toward unreasoning despair. Pushing her to take the next step... the seemingly inescapable step. And giving her the power to do it.

"I thought I could help, too," she said. "I thought what you think... oh, Chaz. You were pretty and sweet. I wanted...."

There was too much rain on her face to see tears, but there they were in her voice. "If I could find more like me... but... Amelia Weber, Chaz. She was perfect and smart and I killed her. I killed her, didn't I?"

"Suze," he said. "You have an illness. It gives you some advantages, but it means that you're not always in control of your choices. You meant to make her stronger, didn't you? You meant to make her like us."

"I *killed* her." She laughed like it had claws, and was clinging inside her throat. He wanted to go to her, but he knew better than to encroach on her space.

The hairs on the back of his neck were prickling.

Not lifting. Not in this wet. But he could feel the static charge surround himself as the leader sent its first tentative feelers toward the raging sky. Suze was reaching for God's pen.

"Hah," she said. "The worst thing is knowing that fucking Russ Thorne passed the test, and that gorgeous genius kid--" She shook her head, water droplets flying. She couldn't even say Amelia's name. "Stay back, Chaz. This is how it has to be."

He stepped forward anyway. Of course. He reached out to her, but she danced back. She threw her hands up. Offering herself, black and gray in the foaming

light of the storm. His skin tingled; he felt a faint stinging and heard an indescribable sound.

Then...

The rain on his face. Cold. The wet earth steamed. His ears rang; the thunder seemed far away, as if it rattled against the other side of brick walls, thick doors.

When he picked himself up, the world was spotted and sore.

Tased, he thought, remembering another time. *Harpy, I need you.*

Daphne wasn't there.

Suze was. She lay on her back, arms flung out. Around her, scorched Astroturf spidered out in melted patterns that echoed her scars. His heart threw itself against his ribs. He froze, reaching toward her. He couldn't lift his feet.

Slowly, Suze pushed up on her elbows. "Damn," she said, speech thick. Her eyes focused on Chaz. She pulled herself into a crouch. Her jaw moved, but she couldn't seem to make words.

But she stood, and Chaz felt the sharp prickle across his neck again.

He hurled himself forward. Melted plastic tugged at his shoes. She tried to jump back, to push him away. He threw his arms around her.

"Don't do it, Suze, don't do it!"

She twisted convulsively, but he was stronger now. She thrashed in his arms and howled, split his lip, bruised a rib or maybe cracked one. But he held her nevertheless, half his attention on keeping the mirror folded up, put away. Here was someone who didn't need any help remembering the worst things she'd ever done, ever seen.

"Suze," he said, not sure she could hear him. Barely able to hear himself. Saying anything. "Suze, listen. I know. I know it hurts. I know you think you can't fix it. I know you think it's love making you hurt yourself. But I had a friend... she's gone now. But she taught me love is a motive, not a reason. And definitely not an excuse. Hurting yourself more is not love, Suze. It's not love."

Slowly, she kicked less. Slowly, shouts turned to sobs. Sobs became gasps. Gasps subsided to silent shivering--hers and his.

By the time Hafidha and Nikki came to him, splashing across the track with quick, sliding strides, Suze was standing still in his arms--sagging in them, really--and though the storm still raged, the air around them was just cold and

full of wind and rain.

*

The Gulfstream slid through the sky, the last tattered thunderheads disappearing off its tail, and Reyes was checking in on his team--Falkner's team, and someday Lau's team, unless life threw a curveball...and life did throw curveballs--for what he suspected was the very last time. Speaking of Lau, she was checking OKCupid, of all the uncharacteristic behaviors. Chaz was asleep, huddled in a corner under a jacket.

And Hafidha... As Reyes walked down the center aisle toward her, Hafidha's fingers twitched, like a finger-snap, and let go. The spindle blurred with speed, and Hafs drew her right hand upward. Wool--string--dropped out of it as if unreeling from inside her finger. As the spindle slowed, she see-sawed her hand, hooking the string over and under her fingers almost too quickly for the eye to follow. She'd looped up all the finished stuff before the spindle stopped moving.

"You're good at that," Reyes said, because there were times when one could spot proficiency without knowing a damned thing about the process.

Hafidha raised an eyebrow and a corner of her mouth, and wound the collected string onto the shaft of the spindle.

"When did you start spinning?"

"Before I joined the Bureau."

He could quit asking; he felt the flexible wall of her reserve. But she'd taken out the spindle, and used it in front of him, and she hadn't put it away yet. "None of us knew you did that. Not until you--"

"Went off the reservation." She lifted her eyes, half-lidded behind her glasses, from the spindle as she set it in motion again. Yarn slid from her hand.

Her deadpan was good, but not a patch on his own. "But you had one of those--" He pointed with his chin at the spindle. "--in your desk drawer. It was there, but no one ever saw you use it."

"You," she said, and paused to wind up the spun yarn, "haven't retired from sneaky bastardhood, I see. It's harder not to answer when it's all statements and no questions."

"I'm sorry." And he was. "I should have taken up smoking; that would be easier to quit."

She snorted, and produced more miraculous string, wound it on her fingers, and transferred it to the spindle.

Then she set the whole apparatus on her thigh and folded her hands over it. "I started when I got the cancer diagnosis. One of the first things cancer takes is your privacy. This..." She bit her lip and looked to her right, as if there was something there to watch besides her reflection in the window. "I made this the thing I didn't share."

Reyes studied her stark cheekbones, the dense hair she hadn't grown out, the tiny red stone like a blood spot on her earlobe. "And when the anomaly manifested, you needed it even more."

Another snort. "Keep your friends close, and your research subjects closer."

"I never saw you that way."

"Not even just a little?" But she smiled and waved a hand, letting him off the hook. "There was always someone watching. And you know that's not Bug paranoia talking."

He did.

"I liked to give 'em something to watch, as long as they were going to give me the side-eye anyway. But this," she said, turning her eyes to the spindle in her lap, "was me controlling the information. Nobody knows everything."

"That's how it works anyway. You didn't have to go to extra effort."

"Stephen," she said, mock-pityingly. "Wasn't it you who wrote that paper on how outcomes in institutionalized patients depend heavily on giving them the feeling of self-determination and control?"

*

Lau stared at the OKCupid profile--the underexposed photo of a square-faced, pleasantly ordinary-looking man with severely smoothed hair, the awkward combination of restraint and openness in his self-summary. *Treehuggerkyle.*

She tapped the back arrow and read the message in her inbox again. *Don't mean to be pushy--just waving hi. If you're ever in my part of the woods (ouch, sorry!), let me know. I'll provide coffee and ten-cent tour.* It was signed "Kyle Nybaek;" the signature was followed by a phone number.

She could call him. They could exchange e-mails. Maybe it would come to nothing. Or maybe it would turn into something that would hurt when it fell apart.

I know my strengths and weaknesses, she told herself.

She highlighted the message and clicked the trash can icon.

*

Chaz drove; Hafidha watched him. She wanted to put a hand on his wrist. She wanted to apologize.

She wondered if she could blame the Bug for what had turned out to be a remarkable lapse in judgment, but she figured she should probably own it. The odds were good it was just her.

Hafidha reached out and put a hand on his wrist. "Chazzie--"

"Suzanne Zettler's mother's first husband's name was DeGrasso," he said. "Suzanne had an older half-brother. Mark. He did not change his name when their mother remarried. Mark's dad was Caucasian; died of leukemia."

Hafidha could see the pattern burning behind Chaz's eyes. "There's no evidence Mark DeGrasso was a jammer."

"There's no evidence," Chaz corrected, pitiless--of himself, she knew. "*Yet*. First crack and possibly exposure, Wabbit. He could have gotten exposed anywhere, and his first crack could have been his dad dying. Maybe he never converted. What if, for Suzi, the lightning strike was second crack and mythology?"

"What if it was?" When he looked at her, startled, she said, "I know what you're doing, Platyplural."

He sighed and returned his attention to the road. Which was a good thing, given how he was weaving in and out of the legendary DC-area traffic. "I'm trying not to think about what happens next."

"You visit her," Hafidha said. "You do what you can for her. The same things I'm going to do. And you know I'm going to show her my scar."

Chaz's lips peeled back in a coyote rictus. Not a grin; a grimace of pain. He nodded at the road, rather than at her.

"Hey," she said. And waited until he glanced over, because she could be pitiless too. "The bright side is, Arkham's already installed the Faraday cage."

"We owe God a death." -- William Shakespeare, Henry IV part 2, 3.2.253

4.11 "Due North" - by Leah Bobet

Click here to play music.

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Act I

I was fascinated by the country as such. I flew north from Churchill to Coral Harbour and Southampton Island at the end of September. Snow had begun to fall and the country was partially covered by it. Some of the lakes were frozen around the edges but towards the center of the lake you could still see the clear, clear water.... And as we flew along the east coast of Hudson's Bay, this flat, flat country frightened me a little. Because it just seemed endless. We seemed to be going into nowhere... It is most difficult to describe. It was extreme isolation. -- Marianne Schroeder, *The Idea of North*.

Toronto, Ontario, July 7, 2013

Just go, she thought, and hefted the backpack. *Just disappear.*

Eugene's snores echoed under the rising wind. It was difficult to think of hurting him, but the voices, the voices were calling. The bell of her childhood schoolyard chapel; Professor Liu's precise baritone and *Nohkom*'s whispered Turtle Mountain Cree. A Stan Rogers men's choir, the tenor voice breaking like a caught breath on the high notes.

They knew her: Every shred and inch, everything she loved and hated. Not her bra size, not her diagnoses, not a volley of guesses at the heritage of her face. She was *known*, inside, for the first time ever.

It didn't make it easier to walk away.

Rain spattered against the window. "This is so messed up," she shaped soundlessly, and the choir in her head murmured a descant: *He'll be fine--*

-- it's better out there--

--we don't have much time before the storm dies.

Her head ached with reassurances. Their thoughts swirled, ripe, endlessly whispering.

You should see it, the last murmured. *It's so bright*.

She brushed a stray hair off Eugene's forehead. It crinkled softly, his response to everything from a stray breeze to her punk records to being hauled out to Idle No More: an endless banquet of kindly, impenetrable damned concern. She clenched a hand around the strap of her backpack. Tiptoed from the bedroom, out into the streets.

The city looked blearily dark tonight: taken over and taken down by shimmering walls of storm water. Gullies washed through the gutters and burst the drains into the street. She picked her way between the silent condominium towers, through acorn-hard rain, head ducked, summer coat already soaked through. The streets were empty; *last lady on earth*, she thought reflexively, and chuckled, hollow. The choir hummed a laugh that lasted all the way to the dry air of Union Station.

The ticket counter was--*told you so*--still open: One lone VIA Rail clerk leaned behind a clear window, the rim of his smartphone just visible on the desk. She put down a hundred and change in wadded bills and gave him the name they whispered inside her ear. And--that was it. A solitary walk down the hallway to the line of grandmothers and sleepy-eyed backpackers. The procession up the mildewy stairs to the platform, and then onto the train.

"Final boarding for the ten o'clock train northbound with stops at Sudbury Junction, Capreol, Laforest, McKee's Camp--" The PA crackled.

It'll be so bright, the voices crowed, and impulsive, she reached into her pocket.

Threw her keyring out onto the tracks.

The train doors closed behind her, and she leaned back against the prickle plush. *We're going,* she thought. *We're going. We're never coming back.*

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., July 15, 2013

The ringtone on Esther Falkner's direct line sounded, one long, two short. *Long distance.* She closed her hand on her chopsticks. There were any number of reasons: Bekk's college, or Deborah's summer camp, to say there'd been an accident. Mom's heart. Dad's Parkinson's. She shuddered and jammed the speaker button: "SSA Falkner."

"Agent Falkner," the voice said, and it coalesced in a whiff of memory: forest loam, and nitroglycerin, and the pungent stink of tears. "I don't know if you remember me. It's Constable Robin Spears."

Falkner swallowed spittle and vomit; set down her chopsticks on the Styrofoam bowl. *An empty school, its child-sized coffins laid out all in a row.* "Constable," she said, after much too long a silence. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you remember the day you asked me if I'd ever heard of an anomalous crime, and I said it'd come up now and again?"

"It's now," Falkner said, with weird relief. A normal tragedy, after all.

"It's again," Spears answered. "And it's tangled, but I need your help."

"Is this an official invitation? They're tightening up on us here," Falkner said, with what was quickly becoming the normal regret. "International requests have to go through governmental channels."

"It isn't. I'm sorry," Spears said. She wasn't sorry at all. "But there's no time. She's already been missing for a week."

That surge of adrenaline, the one Falkner slept with, cheek to cheek, flared to life. "She?"

Spears took that one word like a fish to a line. "My second cousin Gwen's down in Toronto, taking law, and she didn't show up for her internship on Monday. Her live-in boyfriend reported her missing that night, but you should know what happens when a girl who looks like me disappears."

Falkner did. A little too well. *Probably off drunk. Probably whoring. Probably doesn't matter*. "So the local police are resistant," she said dryly.

Spears snorted; her precise police distance popped like a balloon. "Nothing moved until they found her house keys on the railroad tracks Saturday night. I flew into Toronto Sunday morning, and found two more missings from the same night. Maybe three. And I'm telling you, they're all *wrong*."

Falkner leaned back in that soft chair and closed her eyes. *The anomaly claims another victim*. One day she would make a memorial, she thought, for all the bartenders, parents, law enforcement officers who would--now, forever--look over their shoulders every night. "Tell me," she said, and picked up a pen.

"Three missings," Spears said, after a pause and a shuffle of paper. "Entirely different profiles, entirely different walks of life. None of them had any of the usual problems that make someone take a walk off a bridge. None of them wrapped up their affairs or took more than an overnight bag."

"They took a bag?" Falkner cut in, and filled in the last of that litany: *Probably ran away*.

"Gwen took a bag," Spears said, edged. The sharp side of all those *probably*s leaking through. "The rest--it's hard to tell. Two were recent arrivals to Toronto; the third's just a little too isolated to be noticed if something went wrong. And for extra convenience, the last reported sighting for all three was inside a day of the worst storm the city's ever seen: Flooded subways, power out all over town."

"Lots of distractions," Falkner said grimly.

Spears pounced. "And that's the problem: it's too tidy. Too closely targeting the kind of people who won't bring down official attention, but didn't have any reason to just leave. It's too much," she finished, vowels precise, "of a coincidence."

There's that word, Falkner thought, and Spears's hunch caught through the phone line, swooped down her gullet, and took hold.

This was how Anomalous Crimes was supposed to work; how Stephen Reyes had explained his plans on the day he showed her around this tiny, empty office; back when she had no idea that it would consume her waking life. The anomaly turned bartenders, parents, law enforcement officers into living detectors of the weird. A six-person office didn't have a hope of fighting it alone. Unless they tapped into that network, and *used* it.

Always trust your field agents, Falkner reminded herself, and flipped to a fresh page. "Can you get us an invite up? You're a federal officer."

"In a sense, I am. The RCMP's a federal force," Spears said, and the professionalism cracked. "But--God. I'm just a community constable. They stack us five to a reserve and the next few small towns and wave goodbye for four years, and then we hunker down in our little offices and hope nothing too big happens. My beat's domestics and petty theft. Once every week or two, the kids from Brandon get drunk and come down the highway to beat the shit out of some Indians, and we let them off with a warning as long as they turn around."

Falkner's cheeks heated, treacherous. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Spears replied. *I'm sorry, too.*

Falkner pinched the bridge of her nose and thought, furiously: weights and balances. Hard times spiked violent acts: A million tiny pressures cozied hard into everyone's skin, and tipped the anomalous influences lurking there into life. The trouble was that hard times also meant unpaid weekly leaves, and Monday morning e-mails from Victor Celentano over every line item in your unit's covert budget. Because the national debt ceiling kept rising, the House teetered closer every day to a precarious shutdown, and the nation was watching.

What can I afford to do here? Falkner thought furiously. *What can I afford* not *to do?*

"I might be able to send somebody," Falkner said, striving to keep her deadpan. "But it won't be official. It'll have to be covert."

Spears let out a breath. "Anything you've got."

Falkner poked at her cold noodles, and felt uncomfortably like Stephen Reyes: *FBI big man, breakin' the law.*

"I'll go see," she said, tipping them into the garbage, "which of my people is due for a cross-border vacation."

*

"So," Falkner said, when Chaz closed her office door behind him. "Canada."

"As a concept?" he said, and was rewarded with the thin line of Falkner's smile. "Cold, polar bears, manners. And some good jumping." He coughed. His unit chief didn't want to hear about jumping off tall buildings on the company clock. "I have a friend there, sort of. Crashed on her couch once. But we haven't talked in years."

"That'll make it easier," Falkner said, and handed over a file still warm from the printer. "Congratulations: Your furlough week's come early, as of approximately now. You're going to visit your friend this afternoon."

Chaz opened the file cautiously, suddenly uncertain if it was live. The face of a spiky-haired Native girl stared back at him, steady, with a glint of challenge in her eye. He fingered the photo: Gwen Fontaine, twenty-four years old, second-year law student at the University of Toronto. The sheet underneath it was a missing persons report.

He squinched up his nose. "This my friend?"

Falkner leveled him with a suddenly serious stare. "If anyone asks you, yes. Constable Robin Spears will meet you at the airport to make sure you find her all right."

Chaz felt the chill waltz with his spine this time. This wasn't how Esther Falkner dealt, and she knew *he* knew it: He could see the stress lines around her eyes. "Why?" he asked simply.

Falkner stood, and fell into an unconscious at-ease. "She's Spears's cousin. And Spears thinks it's one of ours."

He winced and waited. It wasn't an answer.

"Chaz," Mom said, and paced the circuit behind her desk, and stopped. "I suppose it's been no secret. The finance committee met last week, and a lot of things are going to get harder around here before they get easier."

Young Charles Villette's skin prickled at the back of his neck; in the place that knew first when a foster parent was about to say things just weren't working out with you. "They get harder?" he said archly, and she lifted a brow.

"Stephen did his job too well," Falkner said, and smiled something sickly.

"We're a modest and very dark black hole in the FBI annual budget, and there's pressure on Victor to see dollar-by-dollar results. I just spent three days in meetings to keep the Idlewood budget."

The prickle on Chaz's neck changed in pitch. He'd been wrong; it was the place, honed younger still, that knew when you and Mom were having tap water for dinner.

"Is it bad?" he asked.

Her expression flickered for a moment: hot shame and concern. "Not yet," she said, and leaned against the wall. "For all I know you don't like him, Victor is on our side. And no one likes to cut funding to law enforcement; the optics are terrible. But we'll all need to be very careful for the next little while. Not draw too much attention to what we do. So I can't precisely ask for a cross-border investigation right now. Which means," Falkner continued--and obviously the topic was closed--"you're on leave, and not official business, and you'll be crossing borders as a private citizen. Which means you're not entitled to carry your gun."

And now he got the message: *And of all my little FBI children, you're the person I can send up against a gamma without a gun*.

"What do I do without official sanction?" he asked.

She gave him a sidelong, dry glance. "Help Spears. Use your extensive FBI training and expertise. Read a few minds."

"Right," Chaz said deprecatingly, and tucked the file under his arm.

"Keep me briefed, please," Falkner said, and opened the door for him. "And Chaz? Thank you."

He nodded and slunk out the office door. She closed it behind him--rarer and rarer--and through the window glass, he saw her pick up her phone.

Chaz padded down the hall to Hafidha's sanctum, tapped briefly on the door. "Wabbit?"

She looked up in a clatter of glitter hairclips and pursed lips. "Mein Platypus?"

"Don't wait up tonight."

Her hands slackened on the keyboard. He waved the file vaguely in the air, and her eyebrows drew in. "We've got a case?"

"I've got a case," he said bemusedly, and went down to his desk for his go bag.

There was a cab waiting at the steps. Chaz directed it to the airport and folded tight into the back seat, knees gangling against the leather and dug into the door. He had never been deliberately asked to go after a gamma alone. There were kinder ways to commit suicide.

It was a strange realization: that without a team at his back, he had no idea how to go about this.

Dulles was busy even midafternoon: Chaz checked in, was frisked, and went to the gate mechanically, head ducked through the foreign country of civilian commercial travelers. He navigated to the last empty vinyl seat--

--and found himself staring down at the sun-browned, cheerful face of Solomon Todd.

"What're you doing here?" Chaz blurted, startled right out of his mask.

"Coming with," Sol said, and grabbed the strap of his pack. "I," he declaimed, "have always loved to travel. I write books about it. And I shall write this trip to our friendly northern neighbor off upon my taxes."

"Professional expense," Chaz said.

"Only the most professional."

Chaz met his steady, cheery, not-a-hint-of-bullshit-in-the-wide-world eyes. *Mom. The telephone call*. The grin lit on his face and slowly spread. "Right," he said. "Adventure, Private Citizen Todd."

"Adventure, Private Citizen Villette," Sol replied, and the plane was called for boarding.

Act II

Well, the only way I see this happening is in an extended ride North. When I say that I mean a long, terrible, trying trip. Perhaps to Churchill, by way of Thompson going and coming, past Ilford and Gillam, this long, almost trans-Siberian experience that we now face. For those that face it perhaps for the first or second or third time there's almost a traumatic experience. They feel awe: this is going to become impossible. It may not be now but it's going to become. And yet they're able to do little or nothing about it. -- Wally McLean, The Idea of North.

The ghost brushed by Nicolette Lau again that morning.

She had already fed it today. The WTF office ghost was happy to take edibles: Clif Bars and the odd steak sandwich went over better than the traditional oranges. *Oh, old ways. How you fail me,* she thought wearily, and crossed to

Chaz Villette's desk. There were better things to pilfer therein, and he wasn't around to notice. She hadn't, in fact, seen him all afternoon.

Arthur Tan looked up from his computer screen as she felt around in Chaz's file drawer for goodies. "Stealer."

"I'll replace it," she said, and snagged a Clif Bar and a pack of chocolate cookies. Tan let out a long "Mmhmm," and abruptly, she felt silly and small.

"You ever feel funny in here?" she asked.

Tan waggled his eyebrows. "All the time."

"Punching fellow officers of the law isn't in the code of conduct, is it?"

"Sadly, no," Tan sighed, with a long glance Down the Hall. But one of the things Lau liked about him was that he didn't make a big deal about getting the message. "Funny weird or funny ha-ha?"

"Funny weird," Lau said shortly, and Tan scrunched his face up.

"This isn't my favorite place to be at night," he said, surprisingly serious. "Although whether that's courtesy of the reading material on offer or how much this *isn't* my warm bed, with my heartrendingly gorgeous wife in it, is something I'd have to report back on."

"Include diagrams," Lau deadpanned, and slid Chaz's drawer shut. It was nothing. It was nothing and she was being a child.

She set the snacks on the corner of her desk, only half-remembering why she'd filched them. Her gaze trawled the shallows of a three-murder case in Boise, skipped over a stack of status reports on witnesses and near-victims exposed once to the anomaly. Landed on a freshly penned notebook page.

It was her notebook, she thought, with that moment of detachment she'd come to know so well. The trouble was, it wasn't her handwriting.

Send this to your doctor friend, it said, in a looping scrawl. She picked one of her business cards, faded and crumpled, and an old printout of an ID file, up from under the notebook: A name. An address. A social security number. *You won't know why. Just trust me.*

The ink was still wet. With a vicious chill, Nikki Lau punched the numbers into her database.

Renee Abdi-Johansen, twenty-one, was nothing past that SSN and a picture: large, institutionally-vacant eyes against a white background that just screamed passport photo, or a crueler land's driver's license snapshot. Lau studied the fine-boned, wary face. It had all the markings of a gamma, slowly starving. And she'd never seen it before.

You are not Japanese, she told herself over the prickle of hyperaware skin. *So this cannot be a Japanese horror movie, so you should probably go use science now.* She plucked the piece of paper off her desk and strode around the corner to Hafidha's dim-lit lair.

Hafidha was pecking at her keyboards, looking like the world's angriest funk librarian. "What're you doing?" Lau asked carefully.

"Spying on my baby brother," she said. "Look, there's a plane ticket from Dulles to Toronto. And look, one Solomon Todd is also scheduled to be on this flight. Oh, behold: A pdf file was e-mailed to our glorious leader from a Canadian IP address, just this very morning."

"Falkner won't like you hacking her e-mail."

Hafs's glare faltered, and she had the good grace to look concerned. "I'm not going Dark Side. I just hate in-person vaguebooking. You don't just *say* you're not coming home tonight, now please choke on my mysteriousness and remember to water the plants."

"You guys have plants now?"

Hafidha scowled at her monitors. "*I* have plants. And I always water the plants. It's part of my failsafe empathy training: Whether I'm picking their leaves off just to hear their little screams."

It had been a long time since that kind of talk had rattled Nikki Lau. She eased the door shut behind her and let the unease stampede free across her face. "Riddle me this: What do you call a case note that writes itself, in its own handwriting?"

"A Bureau stress test," Hafidha shot back, but it was Hafidha, not the Bug. That appraising glimmer wasn't lurking behind her eyes. "This isn't hypothetical, is it?"

"No," she said quietly.

Hafidha leaned back in her chair and frowned. "Give it here."

Lau gave it there: the notepad, the printouts, the business card with that looped handwriting. She turned it back and forth, gave it a desultory sniff. "You sure this isn't one of Tan's pranks?"

"Tan's not left-handed," Lau said, and flicked a telltale ink smear. Hafidha's eyebrow arched.

"Left-handed, hm?" she muttered, and three new windows flashed open on her screen.

"The other thing is," Lau said, and hesitated. "I'm pretty sure I've seen

something like this before."

"When?"

"I don't know," she said awkwardly. Her mind was her palace: sharp and sure, and planned exactly. One did not admit to security breaches in its halls. "About a year ago. I was at the shelter, volunteering, and I could've sworn I left a card for someone. But it turned out to be nothing."

Hafidha tilted her head. "Why was it nothing?"

Lau's mouth worked. There was an explanation, somewhere. Somewhere that kept sliding, jellylike, out from between her mental fingers.

"No," Hafidha said, staring at Lau's tight expression. "Honey, I don't think it's nothing at all."

The windows on her screen multiplied like tadpoles, swimming together upstream. Hafidha turned to physically guide them through the rivers of data; over the firewall dams. "Renee Abdi-Johansen is--an excellent disappearing act. She was a high school student in Minneapolis last time the government heard of her, but there's no record of graduation. No employment records, taxes paid or government benefits. And...nobody under a different name with that face. This girl is either vaporware or a goddamned spy."

The tautness between Lau's temples grew downright uncomfortable. "What's her last known sighting?"

On Hafidha's screens, database entries scattered. "I don't know," she said tartly. "Nobody was peachy enough to report her missing."

"Then how did that note get on my desk?" Lau asked softly.

The lines around Hafidha's mouth drew tight. "Well, I have two theories. One's that Mom and Celentano are about to put a boot in the security desk's collective ass."

The thought gave Lau a chill. The Anomalous Crimes Task Force operated below the radar: unmarked offices, unremarkable doors, into your town Sunday and out by Thursday lunch. They didn't attract the kind of grudges Frank Scott had nursed against the LAPD.

Hadn't attracted, she corrected, grim. *Yet.*

"Next theory?"

Hafidha twirled a bitten Bic pen and smiled mirthlessly. "That Renee just decided she wants to be found."

The pounding in Lau's head escalated to a dull roar. "My ghost."

Hafidha lifted an eyebrow. "That Golden Age swearing or a case fact, there?"

Lau shook her head. "We have one. An office ghost. That prickly feeling, when you're here at night, like you've just seen someone go across the room."

These days, Hafidha Gates was never alone in the office, unsupervised, at night. She shook her head.

"I started leaving it oranges. It's what you do, right?" Lau gritted her teeth to keep the color from taking over her face. *Stop being such a model minority. This isn't embarrassing.* "And they'd go, so I upgraded: Clif Bars. Sandwiches."

"Feeding our office gamma," Hafidha said softly, and then she swiveled to the screen a full second before her speakers let out a quiet, insistent *ping*. Her eyes narrowed into two pupil hurricanes. "It appears that my colleague Nicolette Lau is IMing me."

Nikki burst to her feet, and Hafidha held out one sharp hand. "Hold on."

On the screen, over Hafidha's shoulder, the letters were still forming: a nonstop typed wail. *Please. I need your help and I have to stay outside. I can't be in the room, or people forget me. I don't stick with anyone. No one recognizes me. You've known me a whole* year *and you still forget, every time, and I swear I'm going to go nuts if I can't make it stop somehow--*

Watching the letters form felt horribly wrong: it was watching someone take off their own skin. Lau looked away pointedly as Hafidha slammed speakerphone on her ancient extension and dialed. "Hey, Tan? Nikki around?"

"No, she just left," Arthur Tan said cheerfully. "Her friend's still waiting at her desk, though."

Lau's hands developed a sudden wish to lock everything; every drawer and cupboard. "Which friend?" Hafidha continued, all unconcern.

Tan's voice developed a thin wrinkle. "I don't think I got her name. Young lady, about five foot three?"

"Renee, right?"

"Right what?" Tan asked innocently, and Hafidha's eyes glittered.

"Never mind," she said, and disconnected the line.

When Lau turned back the cursor was blinking. Temporarily at rest. *How do I know you?* she tapped out slowly. *How did you get in here?*

A year ago at My Sister's Place. You left your card and said you knew people who were like me and could help. With everything. I have to talk *to you, for*

real--God I'm so fed up of going through this song and dance every time.

Hafidha *hmm*ed. "This all true?"

The ache in Nikki Lau's head resolved into a sharp point. "I think so."

"You started leaving snacks out when?"

"Around--where were we going?" Lau asked, and caught herself. "Chicago. The bank robberies."

"That would be a year ago," Hafidha said. "For what it's worth, if she was going to kill us, she'd have probably done it by now."

Lau rubbed her eyes and tried to force down her combat reflex. *Victim, not gamma. Victim, probably.* "Sometimes it's not worth it to find out you're not turning into your mother after all, y'know?"

Hafidha snorted. Her eyes were still narrowed: sniper sights. *What do you need?* she flicked across the screen.

You said there was a doctor in Virginia, the letters replied.

"Idlewood?" Hafidha said, stark with surprise.

The cursor stalled. It swept forward; erased. Trembled at the edge of a word. *There was blood when I went to the bathroom this morning.*

"Oh, *shit*," Lau said softly.

"How?" Hafidha demanded, near-affronted.

"It's *always on*," Lau said. "She's jamming. All the time."

Hafidha's hands dropped onto the keys; slumped against the oak desk.

You said you'd e-mail a doctor, the chat window said. *I need it. I need it now.*

*

Chaz Villette had not graced the inside of a civilian commuter flight in a long time. It, he regrettably concluded, sucked balls.

They bounced from Washington to Newark inside an hour, and then were loosed to a smaller, jouncier plane for the hop into Canada. Sol Todd read two chapters of his true crime paperback as if the turbulence didn't even touch him. Chaz held on and dreamed of BASE jumping. At least there the falls were clean.

At the end of it, they wound through a long, slow-moving line with their red-and-white Canadian customs forms in hand. He swore not to bring any liquor or guns into the neighbors' tidy country, and was loosed to a small, grey

departure lounge with a view of the lakefront and the sky. There was a stamp on his passport now, blue ink, dated. A record of official passing. Usually, he moved like a ghost.

Constable Spears waited in the lounge of the Toronto Island Airport, just as crisp and short and dour as he remembered her. *Well, you only see her when there's something to be dour about,* he remembered, and pasted on a professional smile. "Constable."

"Agent Villette," she replied, and shook his offered hand. "Agent Todd."

Private Citizen Villette, he corrected mentally. Todd was, as ever, smoother: "Sol," he said, and squeezed her hand in sympathy. "Where are we at?"

Her eyes flickered, but nothing else betrayed her. "I've booked you into a business hotel a few blocks from the police HQ," she said. "We've got a meeting with the lead detective on the case this afternoon. He's turned up two more missings that night, which puts us at five."

Chaz recognized that tight look now: Fear, and vindication.

"What do they know about our situation?" Todd said delicately.

"That you're friends of the family who might wrap their messy case up in a nice, overwork-free bow."

"Friends of the family," Sol mused. "Well, I suppose we are. The complicated friends you call when there's bad news."

"Do they know we're law enforcement?"

"The lead detective does: Saravanan. He's a pro. But otherwise--" Spears pulled an uncomfortable face. Chaz translated: *No.*

"No matter. Jurisdiction is an illusion of this material world," Todd said, and waved it away like a bad smell. "We're here merely to observe. Scientifically."

"As in 'the act of observation changes the phenomenon being observed?'" Spears asked.

Solomon Todd grinned. "Can't argue with physics," he said, and made for the door.

It was a short subway trip to Toronto Police Headquarters: a surprisingly pink-and-blue pyramid-roofed building coated in eighties-style marble and glass. They were met at the front desk by a tall, brown man in a plainclothes shirt and tie. "Ram Saravanan," he said, and extended a hand. Chaz shook it. "Robin said you might shed some light on our missings."

"That's the hope," Todd said cheerfully, and he led them up two flights of

stairs through familiar-looking industrial carpet, pastel walls, and overloaded desks; to an interview room empty but for a stack of files and a worn red binder.

"That's your missing persons?" Chaz said, and hooked a chair.

Saravanan nodded. "Biggest thing we get."

The red binder went on for pages. It went on for years. Too many of the faces in it looked like Robin Spears. "Who are our new contestants?" Sol Todd asked.

Saravanan definitely knew they were law enforcement: He didn't even blink. "The last was reported just this morning," he said, and spread out files across the scuffed table. They were all fresh: the beige cardstock not yet creased with use and passing from hand to hand.

Chaz flipped the top file open. A round-spectacled young Filipino man--Arvin Costello, twenty-six--threw the thumbs-up in a baseball stadium seat with a Jays cap perched on his dark hair, beside the roommate who'd called to say he hadn't come home yet. Beneath the next, a sturdy, middle-aged white woman with long, bleached hair and a gardener's rake had not shown up to her volunteer hours at the local nursing home. Todd studied a school photo of a teenaged boy, brown and bright-eyed, posing uncomfortably with hastily combed hair. His parents were in the other room with Saravanan's partner, absolutely frantic.

Beneath them all, Gwen Fontaine's file lingered: a sharp, thoughtful face captured at the top of a Ferris wheel, taken somewhere where there were rollercoasters and a half-clouded sky. She leaned up against the shoulder of a beaming young Chinese man, arms in her lap, looking boldly out from printed pixels and ink.

"So much for a pattern," Chaz said, and lined them up in a clean Tetris row. "Tell me at least they're from the same neighborhoods."

"There's overlap," Saravanan conceded. "It's all the downtown west end. But that's still four police divisions' worth of space."

"Big city," Todd said, sighing.

"Big, mobile city. Get on a subway train and, eventually, you're anywhere."

"We did a map," Spears added, and unfolded it from under the mess of files. Five red blotches marked the last time anyone had seen Gwen Fontaine, Arvin Costello, Irene Czerny, Daniel Badi, Christof Wyrzowski. Scattered around them, small as raindrops, a double handful of green dots peppered the straight-grid streets.

"What're the green ones?" Chaz asked.

Spears's mouth set. "Anishnaabe and Cree women who've disappeared in the last five years."

There were a lot. Even weighed against that red binder, hulking ominously on the table, there were a lot.

The squirm wormed its way out from under Saravanan's professional calm. "We've put a call out to the community, and dragged the lake Thursday. The first theory was that someone had been swept in by the storm."

Todd leaned in. "What'd you find?"

"Dead raccoons," Saravanan said, pointedly. "Garbage. Tree branches. Once those keys were located and identified as Gwen's, this moved from an Unknown to Suspicious Circumstances. There's no train ticket purchased under her name, but we've asked station security for their CCTV tapes. It's a tossup, though: The station flooded that night. You heard we had a storm here?"

Todd shook his head.

"One hundred and twenty three millimeters of rain. That's more than we usually get all of July."

Chaz did a quick conversion: metric to imperial. *A lot,* he decided, *of rain. A lot.*

"The subway was down, roads were closed. Power was out all over the city," Saravanan said dolefully. "I saw some great pictures of a Porsche being drowned in the underpass down by the train station. So needless to say, the station staff are still trying to find out if their CCTV was even recording."

Chaz paged through the files; rearranged them, again and again and again. "Are there any better leads for the other missings that night?"

Saravanan shook his head. "But don't take that as meaning too much. Missings are a mess, always."

Chaz brushed the map with his fingertips; brushed the sparse red dots, and the multiplied green. *Red pill or green pill? Choose wisely, young savior complex.* "Investigating is investigating," he said, carefully; well knowing he was close to treading on toes that'd been stomped before. "We don't have to choose an angle before there's more to work on."

He caught Spears's eye. She nodded, once. Assent, tinged with defeat.

"All right," Sol said, and flipped the file closed. "First principles. Can we take a look around Gwen's apartment?"

"We already interviewed the boyfriend," Saravanan pushed in. "As far as I can tell, he's clean. He only calls us about every eight hours, after all."

Sol nodded: the sage attention of a career journalist. "Good. Then he'll be helpful," he said, and pushed up from the chair. "Do we reach you here?"

Saravanan looked at his three rogue operators and sighed. "Yes. Robin has my extension."

They left the station with a stack of photocopied files tucked in Chaz's messenger bag: into the pressure of a heatwave summer. The air was thick; it pressed down on his lungs like a pillow over the face. None of them spoke until they were across the street, down into the concourse that led to a white-tiled subway station that did, yes, smell faintly of mold. Spears led them to the platform and leaned hard against the mosaic mural of white-and-blue-shirted hockey players that deked and dodged before the subway tracks.

She looked bad. But only if you understood how bad, for career cops, looked precisely like nothing at all.

"You want to change your mind and do the green pill?" he asked quietly.

She looked up, and her eyebrows furrowed. "Profilers. Right," she said, and shook her head. A business-suited woman strode by in clicking heels, *crack crack crack*, and plucked a discarded newspaper from the bench beside them.

"No," Spears said, and crossed her arms. "The missings cluster's what got me to call you out here. It's the better lead."

"But?" Sol Todd said.

"But," she said, "it rubs the whole thing in just a little too hard."

Chaz was starting to get the picture. "Are Aboriginal missings--"

"Cree," Spears corrected.

"--an ongoing problem here? Sorry," he said awkwardly. He'd tried beforehand, to get the right word.

"You've never heard of Robert Pickton, have you?" Spears had turned abrupt; the face Charles Villette himself put off to the world when wrapping his tail around something hurt. "Or the B.C. Missing Women's Investigation?"

Todd nodded. Chaz didn't. They had to be Canadian cases.

"Make time to hear of it," Spears said, and the train, boxy and long compared to the D.C. Metro he knew, pulled into the station. Spears pushed off the wall and hit the yellow platform line before it slowed to a stop. "C'mon."

I am in a different country, Chaz thought, with perfect clarity, and then Robin Spears led them through the brushed steel doors, into the crowds.

*

Eugene Leung looked like hell.

It's not him, Charles Villette thought, gut unclenching, as he let them wander through his empty home: a glass-walled shoebox of a condominium, glittering with chrome and half-unpacked boxes and three furtive Transformer figurines on a high shelf. The dishes in the sink were gently molding, but the floor was spotless.

He had left everything precisely how it was for her. He had reached out and frozen time.

"I haven't gone to work," he told Spears, as it were a virtue. "I want to be here in case she comes home."

"I understand," she said. It was more credible than most people could have been. Chaz wandered deliberately away from it, into the bedroom. Around the rumpled ruins of two lives.

Gwen Fontaine's presence in the condo had never been, he guessed, more than traces. Her clothes half-hung in the closet and piled unfolded near the laundry basket; her vinyl collection, curbside-battered, was shelved in strict alphabetical order in milk crates where it wouldn't catch the sun. A short shelf stuffed with yarn, soft or scratchy, half-unraveled, sank roots around battered records by bands called Hostage Life and A Tribe Called Red.

And by contrast, Eugene was everywhere: In the K-Pop posters on the bedroom walls, the teachers' college textbooks stacked in neat rows on Ikea bookshelves, the two shelves of men's bathroom products to her one drawer. *I wonder if he noticed,* Chaz thought dully, and touched the one towel discolored with bright green Manic Panic. She hadn't really been here. No more than glancingly, around the edges.

It was hard to tell just by looking what was missing.

"Eugene," he called awkwardly, gentle as a wet cloth on a burn. "What sort of things did Gwen take?"

He reappeared in the doorway, a puzzled, hungry ghost. "Clothes," he answered, tense and beaten. "Our toothpaste. A bunch of her knitting needles and blank notebooks, and some books--I'm sorry. I don't know which ones. All that's there is the holes on the shelves."

"That's all right," Spears said. "We can work on that."

Chaz flipped open the medicine cabinet and studied the gaps in the dust. There were prescription bottles in there: Gwen Fontaine, Ativan, in 1-milligram doses. "Robin," he called softly, and held out the bottle; small in his skinny hand.

Spears's worn eyes darkened. "Gwen has anxiety attacks," she said. "The official diagnosis is PTSD."

"Didn't bring her meds," Chaz murmured. "Didn't have time?"

"She took her journal and a week's worth of clothes," Spears countered, turning the bottle in her broad hand.

"But not this, and not her laptop, and not her cell phone," Chaz said, and shook his head. "Where was she going that she didn't think she'd need them?"

Spears palmed the bottle and led him out to the living room, where Sol Todd was nodding gently to Eugene's despondent voice. "They just keep saying lonely people walk away for all kinds of reasons, and it doesn't mean she was...kidnapped, or--" he shuddered. "But Gwen wasn't lonely. She had friends at her law program. We went to her punk shows and people recognized her. She volunteered."

Which doesn't mean you're not lonely, he thought, but Sol had already caught the ball and was running. "Where did she volunteer?"

"She knit hats and gloves for the homeless during the winter. And does some time at the Native Women's Resource Centre; advocacy work. But in the summer it's mostly here." Eugene handed them a flyer: red and black ink on stiff cardboard. "They pick fruit trees in people's back yards--food that'd just rot--and split it between the volunteers and a couple soup kitchens. Gwen came home twice a week with a bucket of cherries, or mulberries one time. I came home just two weeks ago and the whole place smelled like brown sugar crust. She said it was how her grandpa did his pies."

Only a trained profiler would have caught Robin Spears stiffen.

Chaz and Todd were both trained profilers. "Busy woman," Chaz noted, and Todd pocketed the flyer without a second glance.

The distraction worked: Eugene's eyes filled again, and he let them. "She's amazing," he said, like a confession. "All the people who talk a line about making a better world, and she just *does* it. She's one of a kind."

"Eugene," Sol said gruffly. "Do you have anyone in town? Friends, family?"

Chaz saw the words work through his synapses. "My third-year roommates. They still live in our old place on Brunswick Avenue."

Sol picked up the phone and pressed it into his hand. "Call them," he said. Kind. Firm. "Tell them what's up. We'll keep in touch, but you don't have to be alone right now."

"Right," Eugene said, bewildered, and they showed themselves out the door.

The flyer resurfaced in the elevator, humming down the glass tower that fit so badly with those milk crates and thrift-store jeans. Chaz cleared his throat, and shoved his hands in his pants pockets. "You heard something just now," he said.

Spears's eyes were hard. "Gwen making pies just like her grandpa did it."

Chaz tilted his head. "Gwen's not a baker."

"I don't know about that," Spears said quietly, "but Gwen's grandfathers were both dead years before she was born. She never met them. There was no pie crust."

Chaz sucked in a breath. "Is there a reason to lie about it? I hate to say it, but it doesn't look like she's half as excited about living with Eugene as he is about her."

She shot him a troubled look. "I'll check back in with Gwen's professors and her internship. Ask them what kinds of stories she was telling them."

The elevator touched earth with a rumble and a *ping*. Spears strode through the postmodern lobby, past bare-birch faux trees and mood lighting, to the oppressive evening sun. "I'll meet you at the hotel, if you remember the way back."

Sol wiggled his smartphone. "We have a guide."

"Right," Spears nodded, and took the sidewalk at a fast clip.

Chaz looked at Sol; at the flyer in his other hand. "Well, I'm not tired yet," he said. "Where to?"

Sol twitched a grin, and pulled up his Google maps. "Arvin Costello was reported missing by his roommate, right?"

"Right," Chaz said, and dug for the file.

"I hear the interviewing is lovely this time of year," he said, and wiggled his hand for a cab.

*

Arvin Costello's bedroom was the polar opposite of the glass-walled funeral they'd just left. Chaz toed a pile of pulp horror anthologies forming a tower defense game beside his bed. Their yellowed and thumbed pages crackled in

protest. A whole wall of magazines and hardcovers lined the shelves that obscured his desk from view.

This is a fortress, Chaz thought, edging around another stack of used paperbacks, and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was not quite an intervention. Half an intervention; maybe six hundred milli-Hoarders, and rising fast.

Arvin's roommate Nadia, a restless thirtyish black woman with a bartender's cracked hands, paced the shockingly spartan living room. "The problem is I don't really *know* him. I got the place off Craigslist, and it works fine, but we just don't do the same scene."

"What's his scene?" Sol asked quietly, perched on the arm of a white Ikea sofa.

She shrugged uncomfortably; felt for words like a missing tooth. "He's quiet. Stays in his room reading most of the time." Her gaze faltered; fell on a lightly dusty spider plant, tangled in an aloe vera, tangled in a long, dangling vine of *something*. "I work nights, so we go whole days without actually seeing each other. It took me three days to figure out he hadn't actually been home."

Chaz considered how literal the feeling of your stomach sinking could be. "Did he have any friends? Girlfriend or boyfriend?"

"Not that he ever brought around when I was home," she said, and shook her head slowly. "Just the books, and the jungle here."

Sol brushed a leaf on some fat juicy cactus Chaz didn't recognize. "It is rather a lot of plants."

It was, Chaz thought, rather an understatement. If Arvin Costello's books were a fortress, the plants were the lovingly tended Swiss Papal guard.

"Those are Arvin's," the roommate said, and scrubbed a hand over tired eyes. "He's one of those city farmers; brings home cuttings and stuff. The first few months I was here, the landlady thought we were running some kind of grow-op and called the cops on us. We had to sit down with two officers from 52 Division and explain the difference between weed and Thai basil."

Chaz raised both eyebrows. Solomon Todd reached into his pocket, and pulled out the flyer they'd taken from Gwen's shelves. "Does this look at all familiar?"

Nadia's forehead crinkled. "They do trees, right? Yeah; Arvin had them over here once when I left for work. A whole crew of people, picking the crabapple tree out back."

Chaz heard Sol's jaw set: *Eureka*.

*

Lau sat cross-legged beside Hafidha's closed door, and passed the notebook paper back and forth under the crack beneath the door. It had grown to two dozen pages now: A jagged manuscript of unspecified trouble at home and lost chances, all ending--and beginning--in a backpack late at night, packed in the first merciful days where no one seemed to be watching her anymore.

It was nothing she hadn't heard before. She'd heard it nine thousand times. But reading the inevitable explosion, the flight from home, the fall into women's shelter after women's shelter in Hafidha's glittery purple gel pen just made the whole story that much more terrible.

Renee Abdi-Johansen had been a beta for three and a half years. Her kidneys hurt in the mornings. Her heart creaked when it beat.

Behind her, Hafidha spoke in a low, insistent murmur over the Skype connection to Idlewood, and Casey Ramachandran answered back.

"Ask about fatigue," Hafs ordered, and Lau duly scribbled a note and sent it under the door.

"Tired most days," she read from the scrawled reply. "Don't have a lot of places to go, though: Cafeteria downstairs, showers, and here."

Ramachandran, through the screen and across the wires, shook his head. "I need blood work. I need a proper medical history."

"Casey, honey," Hafidha snapped, "explain to me how we get that without forgetting her halfway to the needle, and we'll get you all the spit and toenails you need."

Another page slid, paper rain down a paper windowpane, under the closed door. Lau plucked it up and ignored Ramachandran's answer.

"So?" she asked, when Hafidha signed off and stretched, still seated, her spine cracking like a row of land mines.

"Doesn't look good," she scowled. "Our dearest Casey is scrambling. I don't think he's ever had to take a tissue sample through a locked door. He's going to get Frost on the line."

"Frost?"

"She's local," Hafidha replied, tapping keys at the speed of light. "And a robot. Casey does have a theory about the manifestation, though."

There was a rustle of paper on the other side of the door. A Post-It note

shaped like a pig shot toward Lau's knees. *Oh?*

"People forget you right away," Hafidha said, tapping keys at the speed of light. "That's a short-term memory hack. But Nikki here had the ghost, so you must have written to her long-term memory slowly, over the last two years." She raised her voice above the hum of fans, the muffle of the plywood door. "Hear that, Renee? Stubborn bitchery pays right off."

Lau held up the shred of notebook that slid under its gap: *Right on*, in glittery purple ink.

"It also tells me how we get around it," Hafidha said smugly. "Three more hours and all *this* writes to long-term memory, and then we're golden, kids."

"Great," Lau said. She already had to use the bathroom. "What're you doing?"

"Snooping," Hafidha said humorlessly, and turned her distaff screen. The stuttery image of Detective Saul Zingermann shuffled paper and dirty coffee mugs aside from halfway across the country. "Hi, Saul. How's it coming?"

Zingermann's voice was tinny, through the speakers. "I did a little checking on the names you gave me. Dug up some stuff, you know?" He held the file across his desk like it was the idol and Hafidha's latte the whip. "There's a family a few suburbs over: name of Johansen, matches your given address. Eagan, Minnesota: Onion capital of the United States. The mother works in IT for Northwest Airlines; the father lost his job in 2008. Two daughters, and another Johansen of no fixed relation."

The note that came through the gap in the door had nearly torn with the pressure of the pen. *My grandmother,* it said. All the stories at My Sister's Place were familiar; were the same. Lau held it up wordlessly to Hafidha, to Zingermann's screen.

"But, y'know, I found your funny thing." Zingermann's affable, inscrutable Midwestern face didn't shift a hair. "Until a few years ago there are three school records. And then there aren't."

Lau's eyebrow rose. "Was there an investigation?"

"Nope," he said, with a shrug. "No missing persons report filed, you know?"

"I meant Child Services," Lau said, and he let out a small *hmm*.

The pages kept coming, sheet by sheet. Crammed with writing. *He didn't want her to move in with us but my mother said he was being paranoid; she wanted us so badly to have a family. Her parents are across the world and when the trouble started they couldn't kick her out on the street, and so she decided it must be my fault, my sisters were fine, she didn't do those things to my sisters, it must be me--*

"Nothing from Child Services, no. But a fella's got to make a connection between how much money's around in Eagan and all the budget cuts we saw here once the economy crashed. They do a lot with less over there, let's just say that."

"And rich people don't hit their kids, of course," Lau said bitterly. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "How many more hours, now?"

"Two hours, fifty-five minutes," Hafidha chorused out. "And then Renee can go visit our friendly neighborhood Dr. Robot."

"I'll put on coffee for you," Zingermann said, and signed off.

The crackle of paper under the door became a hurricane. *Why are you going to my parents' house?*

Nikki took a deep breath. "You've read all the files on my desk, right?"

The awkward silence on the other side of the door was a qualified, categorical *yes.*

"The anomaly's a contagion, we think," she said quietly. "That's why we keep files on all the people who walk away from gamma explosions. So that eventually, we can stop these things before they cost lives. And if you were exposed to the anomaly in Minnesota?"

Hafidha cocked an eyebrow and finished it for her. "We go to Minnesota and hunt Bugs."

The signs of life were faint this time, on the other side of Hafidha's plywood door: a rustle of indecision. One could imagine the sound, furtive, quiet, of a very young girl sniffling, very hard.

I'm coming, the next, eventual note said.

Lau had seen enough grief at a distance to know, gut-deep, her reply. "You're coming," she said. "Pack a bag."

*

The business hotel by the cop shop was narrow and stuffy: an old building dressed in new drapes to push past the midlife blues. Chaz waited his turn for the tiny shower stall and toweled his hair off on his twin bed. Todd was already stretched out in a pair of soft Superman pajama pants, poking at something on his netbook in front of Francophone TV.

"The Matrix?" he asked, and Todd shrugged.

"It's more interesting in other languages," Todd said. "You can spend the boring parts tracking the mismatches between the translation and the English

subtitles."

"*Merde!*" said Francophone Neo.

"*Ouuiiiii,*" French Morpheus intoned.

"That bit was the same," Todd said, and unplugged his devil duck USB.

"I never picked up French," Chaz said, and slung the towel over his shoulder. "It jumbles into the Spanish and makes it do funny things."

"Beautiful language," Sol said. "It's been managed by committee for four hundred years, and it still manages to grow and thrive. Very All-American success story."

Chaz had enough exposure hours to Solomon Todd, after all these years, to hear both the wink and the buried edge. "I found the case," he said hesitantly, and shook his head. "I started reading it while you were in the shower."

"Read the whole thing," Todd said nonchalantly, and Francophone Neo stared at the million-foot drop, gulped, and edged his way back into the hands of his oppressors. "They have different benchmark cases here. BTK or Ed Gein are nothing, but it's only been ten years since men in white hazmat suits sifted every inch of Robert Pickton's pig farm for finger bones on the nightly national news."

Chaz huffed a breath. "Different mythologies."

"Different mythologies," Todd agreed. "You must unlearn what you have learned."

On the screen, Hugo Weaving pasted Francophone Neo's mouth shut. He twisted and writhed, aching to speak French. "I don't know why I didn't expect this much of a culture gap," Chaz said after a moment.

"First time abroad?" Todd said, but kindly enough.

Chaz shook his head. "Short trips, though. It might as well be."

Todd flicked the TV to mute and stretched, leonine, on his hard hotel bed. "There's something about places that look almost familiar. We fill in the gaps; we expect them to be just like home just because the restaurant chains and the languages are the same. The big trick to being abroad is to remember that they're not even close."

Chaz balled up the damp towel. "Read the whole case, then."

Todd nodded. "It's not one of ours, but it's a good model for how deeply in-house policing politics can cost lives."

And Chaz caught the edge again; the string Sol Todd always left behind him, saying nothing outright, but daring you to pull it.

"Falkner told you too," Chaz said finally.

Sol opted for a nod. "Esther told me a few weeks ago. So I can start making plans."

"Plans?"

"Plan, plural," he said. "You have thought about what you'll do after."

Chaz looked at him as if he'd just turned into a duck with a blue rubber spatula. "After?"

Sol waved an airy hand around the blind business hotel room. "After gammas. After go bags. After *this*."

He hadn't. It slid out, apparent even with his habit of hiding away; smoothing thoughts and emotions into a blank, even mask. He felt like Wile E. Coyote, suddenly treading air where there was a road, once.

"It's good to have a career, is all," Todd said, as urbanely as he discussed the weather and multiple homicides. "Rupert Beale has his talk show circuit. Our greatly-missed Mr. Reyes is finding whole new meanings to full-time parenting, and Nikki puts in a lot of hours at that shelter. I know Esther's had offers to consult at the Pentagon once she hits active service retirement age."

"You didn't go," Chaz said. "You're still here."

Sol regarded him, imperturbably. "It's not after yet."

Chaz blinked at him. *After* was a concrete notion to Solomon Todd; a notion with a budget, a method, an exit date.

On the television, faceless, overdubbed agents chased Keanu Reeves through faceless, grey streets. Mostly because, as so many people frequently did, a man had crawled off a ledge into the bullshit he knew.

Todd clicked the TV off and dumped the remote on the particle-board nightstand. "You have two doctorates," he said, and rolled over in his twin bed. "Just don't sell yourself short."

Chaz was silent for a moment. A long one.

"Goodnight, Sol," he said when it was over.

"Goodnight, Charles," he answered.

Act III

The person that makes the trip more often of course, is going to realize that before long, he's going to be up well against himself. Not against his fellow travellers, no, not so much, but he's going to have to be up against his own sad self. -- Wally McLean, The Idea of North.

The breakfast in the dark, narrow hotel was not inspiring: flat-pack toast, bilious fruit, a bowl of yogurt that had seen better days. "Don't bother with this," Constable Spears said, and shouldered her bag. "We're going across the street."

Across the street was a full-on breakfast restaurant adorned with smiling cartoon suns. Chaz ordered a plate of eggs that exploded with bacon, fruit, and crepes, and drowned it all in maple syrup. "Tell me this stuff is everywhere here. Fulfill my Ugly American fantasies."

Spears snorted; a momentary flash of how she must look on her usual days, when she smiled. "It's around. It's just food."

"There is no *just* food," Chaz said lovingly, and tucked in.

"What's on the plan for today?" Sol asked, over his much more decorous Eggs Benedict.

The normalcy evaporated off Spears's face. "I spoke to Gwen's internship supervisor last night. She says she saw a change; not big. In the small things. She switched from *awesome* to *wicked*. Got distracted a little more often. Was--God."

"What?" Sol asked.

Spears looked, just slightly. "Gwen's supervisor is a land claims lawyer. She's done work with NAN and some of the Treaty groups. And she said Gwen was acting--more *white.*"

Sol hmmed uneasily. "Could she explain?"

"We--" Spears started, drowning in discomfort. "We don't always do assertiveness like white people. We always don't do anger the same way. That's not just the reserves and the residential schools; it's--values. *Zaagiwin. Minaadendimowin*. It's about respecting the value of everyone and everything, not doing harm; living from a place of kindness. I'm--" she broke off, and shook her head. "This doesn't translate."

I am in a foreign country, Chaz reminded himself, and bit down hard on a piece of bacon. More than that; he was in two foreign countries: The Canada that Canada told you it was on the streets, in the airport lounges, on the official literature, and the one where women who looked like Spears and

Gwen Fontaine lived. Those green missing dots were enmeshed into a history and a double handful of cultures and values, and Profiling 101 was based on understanding: What each twitch of the eyelid, what each missing medication bottle or yellowed magazine meant in its context.

You need to read more than that case, Villette, he realized. *Read like hell, or screw up big.*

Sol Todd had worked years as a journalist, and presumably read everything before it was even written. "The important things rarely do translate," he said, smoothly; not indulging, not apologizing, not making her explain. "But that could be important: Gwen stopped doing assertiveness and anger like herself."

"Yes," Spears said, and swallowed. "I don't know what to do with that."

"What about her friends?" Chaz asked, and Spears answered with a sour quirk of the lips.

"Gwen's friends haven't seen much of her since June, which is out of character. I haven't heard back from the Native Women's Resource Centre yet, or Streetknit. But we have an eleven o'clock appointment with the fruit-picking group's director, who is very concerned."

Chaz checked his watch. It was nine-thirty; lots of time for seconds, and early elevensies to get him through the day. He overdosed on maple syrup steadily while Todd briefed Spears on their visit to the Costello household the night before.

Spears frowned, and shuffled through her pack of missing persons files. "One of our missings has a rake in her picture: Irene Czerny. The rest--it'll be hard to say. With the exception of Daniel Badi, no one else had someone closer than an employer to report them missing."

"The parents reported him?"

"His summer school teachers," she said. "He's gunning for early university admission. His parents are Roma immigrants, and according to Saravanan"--and it was clear how much that meant to her--"the community here's a little too fresh from *government is the thing that takes your children* to even think of making a problem official."

"Convenient," Todd said mildly, and tucked away a melon slice.

"It's all convenient," Spears muttered.

"And yet not," Todd added thoughtfully. "I mean, they were all missed. Assuming we're dealing with an anomalous serial offender here, those are people who are usually quite good at identifying people who have weak ties. Every single missing person here had a community that was willing to bring

this to the police."

Chaz frowned. "And five of them in one night. That's a spike that's hard for the fuzz to ignore."

"Five high-risk, reasonably connected targets with routines and people in their lives who'll go to bat for them," Todd said, and tipped a nod at Spears. "From a gamma's point of view, that's dangerously shoddy work."

The realization twisted Constable Spears's mouth with its force. "No, it's not." She cleared her throat. "Not if that gamma is white."

Chaz's eyebrows rose.

"Offenders pick their targets based on who's safe to victimize. Who they decide won't be missed. Well, this sounds like someone who has some pretty common ideas about who other people won't miss: a Roma teenager, a Cree woman, two recent, single immigrants, and an older white woman living alone. They don't *expect* those people to have communities who bring law enforcement in. To them, those people are safe targets just because of who they are."

"And if they did," Todd said musingly, "they don't expect the police to think those people actually matter. Thank you, Constable."

Chaz had spent enough time with Spears that he was starting to be able to read her. Her closed face was a question. "This is where we need your expertise most," he said. "We can see the actions; you'll know, here, what they mean."

She raised an eyebrow, gently. "You read Pickton."

He flushed. "I've started," he said, and looked away. "It's really, really long. And really, really bad."

"It is," she agreed evenly.

He worked his way past the embarrassment he only halfway understood. "Any other cases we should be reading for this? Or just--if I'm a white, Canadian gamma, what might my mythology look like? What stories do I tell myself?"

Spears closed her eyes, and sighed. "Canadian mythology. Well, that we're better and more moral than you guys, for one."

"I expected that," Chaz said dourly.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't know. How do you sum up a whole country? We can't; we keep trying to, and the big joke about Canadian identity is that if we figure out which safe place we left it at, we're sure it'll be just great.

"We don't teach life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; it's peace, order, and good government. And Pierre Trudeau's Just Society, which is the best and worst lie we've ever told ourselves: that we should strive to build a multicultural, multilingual, equal-opportunity society, which means too many people pat themselves on the back and think it wipes out the scars of all the genocide and bullshit that's still going on, right here and now. And if you're not from a First Nation, and grew up here, there's the settler romanticizing of the North, the wilderness. That you go to conquer it; that it's man against wild. That it's where you find and prove yourself, just like all the other settlers who showed up to tame a land that was *obviously* empty all along.

"But it's so wrapped up in everything," she said, and opened her dark eyes again. "So wrapped up in generation, and race, and class, and whether you live in the city or the country or especially the North. It's wrapped up in whether you're from British Columbia and think Ontario and Quebec get everything for themselves, but the Prairies are right-wing cesspits, or you're from the Prairies and feel utterly disenfranchised and like the liberals on either side of you are sucking your life dry. If you're black and, in what should be a tolerant city, no one sits next to you on the bus. If you're Francophone and even though we have two official languages, the street signs aren't bilingual anywhere except Quebec. If you grew up in a small town and loved it, or couldn't wait to get yourself out to the city. When you got here. If you were born here. Who you want to be.

"There's no...profile," she said softly, and gave a small shrug. "No one is ever just a check-box here. It depends on who you *are*."

"But what is it," Chaz asked carefully; careful because he had reached for and relied on those things all his life, "that people go for when they want to feel in common?"

Spears smiled, a little dreamily. "The way we all told ourselves some very good stories about how important it is, society. Some of them are lies. But we try to make them true every single day."

"Speaking of which," Todd said gently, "it's past ten."

Spears pushed out from the table. "Let's settle up, then. Our storyteller down on Richmond Street is waiting."

*

"It presents no real difference," Madeline Frost had said. "Just write a case note."

Frost was indeed an absolute robot. She drew blood, labeled urine, and ordered endless tests with no indication that the arm she handled or the pulse she took belonged to anything more than a corpse.

Does she see me? Renee scrawled on a spare Post-It note; one that appeared next to Hafidha's shin.

"No, honey," she replied through Frost's thin office door. "She just never really cares regardless."

The fluid draw took half an hour; half an hour of dripping quiet. In the hallway, deep in the concrete hospital's guts, Nikki Lau used it to book three seats on a westbound flight and made sure the third stayed empty.

"You've got a great future as a spy, babe," Hafidha said once the plane was in the air; once the flight attendant had handed out three snacks, three coffees, and commented cheerily on the empty seat.

"Me?" Lau said, confused. Hafidha grinned and pointed with her chin at the traveler at the end of their row. She flickered in and out of Lau's awareness: An utterly forgettable, slight black girl with tight-curled hair and a long neck, huddled in a Georgetown sweatshirt that was much, much too big.

"I think I'm learning how to see you," Hafs went on, and tapped the plastic fork against her lip.

"How's that?" someone said by Nikki's left ear; someone of no consequence.

Hafidha grinned, wolfish. "Brains are electrical systems. You make the prettiest little anomalous smear."

The plane landed in Minneapolis under a clear blue afternoon sky, held up by a curling riverband of green. Lau had written out her instructions: *Rent car, liaise with Detective Zingermann, case file in your briefcase under the notepad. Don't question me, lady, no matter what.*

She didn't need it: Hafidha had been right. The feel of that door, pressed against her shoulder as the terrible story slipped through in note-sized nuggets, was as fresh as ever. She gripped the wheel as Hafidha called out directions from the passenger seat. The back seat was empty--or it wasn't. Or it was. The intellectual and perceptual parts of her brain were grinding against each other so hard they threw sparks.

Do your list, she told herself, and piloted them to the station.

"You again," Saul Zingermann said as Lau and Hafidha walked into the police bullpen.

"It's the hotdish," Hafidha said. "Keeps us coming right back."

He spread his hands: a silent *What can I say?* "I have to say your company's better when it comes without this," he said, and nodded at the pile of files on his desk.

"You've opened a case," Lau said.

"That's what we do here, us officers of the law. Although it's hard to call it missing persons if she's found." He looked around. "Miss Abdi-Johansen is...here?"

"In your washroom," Hafidha said. "Her special power's line-of-sight only."

Zingermann nodded thoughtfully. "Third edition?"

"Third," Hafidha scoffed. "I play with THAC0."

Zingermann handed the files out. "Bold. So that's your friend Renee there, and this here's her grandmother, one Gudrun Johansen."

Lau flipped open one with each hand, and peered at Renee's photo. She was getting used to the way her memory slipped and blurred: the picture slid between her fingers like butter. Teenage and compact; fine-boned in a way that might have hinted darkly at bleeding kidneys and hollow cheeks to come, or might just have been the perks of being seventeen. She was an artist; collage work. Her magazine-page phantasmagorias had hung in school board art shows and decorated the back covers of her high school yearbook.

There is so much I don't know about you, Lau thought, and turned the page.

"My first concern, given the story Renee told about how Mrs. Johansen went about treating her," Zingermann said, "would be the other girls in the house. We're going to pay a call this evening, with Child Services. And we'd deeply appreciate you coming along in case we're about to bring one of yours in."

"If this picture's current, I don't know that Gudrun's one of ours," Lau said. Mrs. Johansen was stocky, solid, shoulders broad. The kind of build that a screenwriter would call reliable, in a protagonist; that would be terribly threatening if you were a child on the other end of her fist.

Hafidha read down the paper file for a moment; then, frustrated, pulled it up on her phone and let the letters whir. "Retired secretary for Minnesota Fisheries, one son, one divorced husband who has let fly to Florida and is not likely to return." She glanced at the washroom door. "Renee didn't know the half of it. Her grandmother moved in after Daddy Johansen went on disability after a car accident, but she also brought four hundred thousand in cool cash from selling her house to do it."

Lau fingered the photo and scowled. "They're on one income. That would explain some of the reluctance." The fingers of familiarity were tickling at her now. She had seen this photo at least once, before. She had looked up an address and phone number in Florida, and not been sure why she'd done it. *How long* have *I been working this case?*

"Where's our anomalous exposure?" she said, shortly. *Do your job, and follow your damned list*. "If it's not direct from Gudrun Johansen, where's it from?"

Zingermann coughed lightly. "I have a little theory about that," he said. "Six years ago there was a bridge that fell over the Mississippi River."

Lau remembered it: A crumpling arch, sinking into the water of a summertime river over and over on the news, as pavement slid and trucks tilted. "She was on the bridge? That's how she got exposed?"

"I talked to a guy I know down at Hennepin County Medical. Renee and her father were both on the bridge: driving home from something or other. But it didn't show up on your friend's hospital records because she walked away without a scratch. It was her father who got all busted up. Injury to the spine. Tried to go back to work, but hasn't been able to since." He organized his papers and looked at her sidelong. "Didn't talk about that, did she?"

Lau sighed. The trouble was, she couldn't even say.

Hafidha had looked up from her screen, big-eyed. "If a gamma died on that bridge--"

It means this isn't a case, it's a cluster. They were features of epidemiology and suicide contagion. Theoretically, Lau had known for a long time that an anomalous cluster could happen: dozens of people exposed to the anomaly once, just waiting for their poppers to pop. But it had, until now, been theoretical.

"We need to get hands on a map of that bridge," she said, and thumbed her phone on. "Everyone who survived it; where their cars were, where they've gone since, who they're associating with."

"Ahoy the black vans," Zingermann said dryly.

Lau snorted. "You make it sound so...government spook."

"Baby, I hate to read you our job description after all these years," Hafidha added, and nudged Zingermann. "You're getting pretty slick with this sort of thing."

Saul Zingermann shrugged, but Lau saw the flush in his cheeks. "Ma Zingermann always did say I was a clever boy. I got you all a hotel room for the night, down the street. If you want to go freshen up and talk to Miss Abdi-Johansen, Child Services won't move until school's out and the children are home."

Lau nodded, and rapped on the washroom door. "You hear any of that?" she said, through the paper-thin crack in the frame.

"The whole thing," Renee's voice said, half-there, from the other side. She sounded strained.

She sounded like she'd been crying.

"Renee, I--" she started, and that soft voice cut her off.

"It hurts, that's all, okay? In my back. It hurts."

Lau swallowed the blockade of words in her throat. "Right. Just come get in the car when you're ready," she said. Helpless. Useless. "They'll call us when they're ready to take you home."

*

"She used to volunteer," the woman said: short-haired, sensibly dressed in bright patterns and solid shoes, her trim-nailed hands never still. She'd introduced herself as Laurie; the kind of bright, busy personality who ran non-profits mostly alone. "She used to volunteer a *lot;* she was one of our pick leaders for two whole summers. I thought, when she stopped coming, it was a time and money thing. I didn't even *think* she was in trouble."

Sol Todd perched on the secondhand desk. *Oak*, he decided. Whoever had sanded the old finish off and applied a new coat, slopped and cheerful, had been careless: hardened varnish spelled out a line of Braille underneath his palm. It kept the world on its axis, that there were always places like this: half an office suite in a refurbished warehouse; donated computers and apple-bright flyers printed by a friend of a friend; awards from local weekly papers nailed up on the walls.

God, I'm old, he thought, a little fondly, and flipped open his notepad.

"When did she stop coming?" he asked, more scribbler than cop.

"Three weeks, a month ago?" Laurie said, and pulled a face. "I don't know. I *should* know. Dammit. I'm sorry. We lost a couple of regulars that week. It's the end of the school year. People move around, or go home for the summer."

Young Charles shot him a look he didn't need, not after this many years following stories around. Sol humored him, and kept his voice steady. "Do you remember who else stopped showing up?"

"Our system will," she said, and stationed herself behind the computer. "Although it's hard to tell if someone's stopped showing up or just can't do the picks we have posted until a couple months have gone by. We've got thousands of volunteers. Some of them only pick once a summer."

"We have a few names," Spears said, and rattled them off. Laurie tapped at her system, and a tiny crease built between her light eyebrows. "Daniel Badi

only came on a few picks," she said. "He's a high school student; they have to do forty hours of volunteering to get their diplomas, so they're in one summer and gone by the end. Christof Wyrzowski shows up about twice a year, and has since we started. Arvin Costello's a regular, even though he only joined this season: He did two picks back to back, one day. Really nice guy; he helped with some data entry around the office, too."

"Irene Czerny?" Chaz asked, gangling on a green wooden office chair.

Laurie frowned. "One pick. Just the one." And then her eyebrows rose. "With Daniel Badi, Arvin Costello, Gwen Fontaine, and Christof Wyrzowski."

The telltale adrenaline woke in Sol Todd's wrists; spread the taste of gunmetal to his throat. "And when was that?"

"June fifteenth," she said, and furrowed her brows. "Cherry season."

Spears's eyebrows rose. "That's a full month before our...trouble started."

Planning time, Sol decided, and closed his notepad. "Nothing before or after that brought them together?"

"Gwen and Arvin picked together," Laurie said, and shook her head. "But--"

Sol already had the business card out, fast as a card sharp. "Please let us know if you find anything else. You've been a wonderful help."

Those short-nailed gardener's hands took his card, turned it over. "Freelance journalist? What's your interest here?"

Sol smiled, reassuringly. "We're doing a favor," he said, "for a friend."

They skipped the usual pleasantries this time. Sol stepped outside that wood-hewn office into a bubble of quite personal cold.

"People who volunteer," Chaz said. "Gardeners. Who targets gardeners?"

"It's a valid victim pool. What do they tell lonely people to do?" Todd said, and quirked an eyebrow. "Get out of the house. Do activities you enjoy."

"Volunteer," Spears said bitterly. "That and salsa dancing."

"What *is* it with salsa dancing?" Chaz muttered, as they took the stairs down into the thick, humid downtown. "Why not tango? Ballroom?"

"Less likelihood of licking your partner being part of the package," Todd said, and wiped his forehead. "Five people on that pick, and they all disappeared. Think there's a chance one of our missings is actually our subject?"

"None of them are skinny like your profile says," Spears objected. Sol's hand flitted into his pocket; brushed the devil duckie, found his reporter's notebook.

Signs and symptoms of a gamma. Stop, drop, and roll, he thought. Stephen would have been proud.

"Gwen's photo is almost a year old," Chaz broke in. "What're the chances the other ones we have aren't current either?"

"I'm on it," Spears said, and took out her phone.

There was a coffeeshop attached to the building: A tiny space packed with industrial wood counters and a barista with a line of Vonnegut tattooed on his bicep. They ordered icy drinks and lit at a corner table. Spears was already muttering a message into Saravanan's voicemail box: "Ram; we wanted to ask about the dates on our missing photos."

The lunchtime crowd deposited in the coffeeshop like tidewrack: Artsy, scruffy professionals in thick-framed glasses, sticky with the heat, holding conversation in snatches about microloans and engagement strategies. Chaz turned his iced coffee around in his palms ceaselessly, beads of condensation disappearing between his long fingers. Sol watched them over the rim of his notebook and the familiar ease of his own cribbed handwriting.

Spears's phone rang, two short, sharp bleats.

"Hello?" she said, with that hint of tension. Sol filed it away: *Eugene's not the only one waiting, and hoping.* "Photo dates. We have a connection, yes."

Spears grasped the air for a pen, and Sol uncapped his and handed it over. She scribbled a line of initials into his notepad, and he craned over her shoulder. Daniel Badi's was recent: A school photo, shot in March. The others were older: September, December, the August before. Families and friends had trouble with recent photos sometimes, if they weren't photography people, or just loving and afraid. Missing persons photographs were memory and begging: a portrait of someone who deserved to be saved. A portrait that looked the way those who loved them wanted them remembered.

He tucked a fingernail under Irene Czerny's initials. "December 2011," he said. "That's a ways."

Saravanan must have heard him. "Her son provided it," Spears repeated; deciphering the buzz of her cell phone. "What was your other thing?" she added, and her face twisted into something uncomprehending.

Sol waited it out. The lunchtime tide surged and fell back while Spears listened, on the phone.

"He's got the surveillance video from the train station," she said finally, face flushed with heat or rage or fear, "and Gwen's on it. At the ticket window, at almost midnight."

"Anyone else?" Chaz asked, and Spears shook her head.

"Alone. She bought a ticket, cash, under a false name to a tiny town as far north as the rail line goes. And boarded the train alone."

"What was the name?" Sol asked, suddenly inspired.

"Susannah Moodie," Spears said quietly. "Who was actually one of the first Canadian women settlers to write a tell-all book. *Roughing It in the Bush.* It's like calling yourself Johnny Appleseed."

A fine gonzo journalist, Sol thought, before the rest of him caught up. "I assume Detective Saravanan's pulled the passenger list."

"Yeah," Spears said. "He's combing it. But so far he's already turned up a Tom Thomson that same night."

"One of the Group of Seven," Sol said, to Chaz having to ask. "The old-timey classic Rat Pack of Canadian landscape painters. I am sensing a theme."

Chaz wasn't actually asking: He mouthed *December 2011* over and over again. "Hang on," he said, and hit speed-dial.

"Hafs?" he said, breathlessly, when the phone clicked to life.

"The Vaguebooker," she greeted him, through the speaker; around the rumble of some kind of engine. "Make it quick; I'm on an important mission I don't plan to tell you about."

Sol raised an eyebrow. Chaz shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, breathlessly; looked around. Turned the volume down. "This is work; we're on speaker. I need a look at someone's background, real fast."

Hafidha let out a sigh. "Give it over."

Chaz read out Irene Czerny's name, date of birth, place of residence. The whoosh of motors and air filled the line. "You know hacking across borders has two toes over the Deeply Illegal line, Secret Agent Man? Edward Snowden is chilling out in Russia because of people like you and me."

Sol cast a tiny glance at Spears's face. She raised both eyebrows, and then her face set into resolute lines. "Agent Gates? Please do it."

"Sorry?"

"This is Constable Robin Spears. I'm a Canadian federal officer. I'll authorize this search and square it later."

It didn't take a legal expert to know that Spears could do no such thing; Sol had watched three episodes of Intelligence and that put paid to the idea by itself. But they were Americans, so they weren't supposed to know such

things. *On such convenient fictions does the world turn,* he thought, as the sound of that motor and the rushing air drowned in Hafidha's quick, urgent voice.

"Right," she said. "Irene Czerny. Took a degree in agriculture from Guelph, Ontario, but not before running away to get married at the ripe old age of seventeen. Until January, when her husband left her for a woman half her age."

"Classy," Solomon Todd said.

"At least they had one last happy Christmas, hmm? Lots of ostentatious Facebook pictures from then on: Looks like she's a member of the *look how much fun I'm having* school of breakup management. We've got one-off shots and credit card payments for all sorts of activities: poetry readings, a gym membership, yoga classes; there's a pile of Eventbrite tickets for political talks, and five Meetup groups. I don't think she went back to anything twice."

"Well, that's what they tell you after breakups too," Todd said grimly. "Get out there and meet people."

"Except she never goes back," Chaz mused. "So she keeps thinking that it's the place or activity that's wrong, because she still hurts. And starts fresh with another one. She only ever went on the one fruit pick."

"Any of those photographs recent?" Sol added in.

"Looks like," Hafidha said, "and--hoo boy there."

Both their phones pinged at the same time. Sol stabbed a finger at his, and the picture came up: Irene Czerny, awful thin; the weight chiseled off her with grief, or bad living. Or the anomaly, slowly nesting, curled like a snake in the gut.

"Who reported Irene Czerny missing?" Sol said suddenly.

Chaz dove into his treasure trove of files. "Her daughter, it says; living out of town. There's a cell phone number listed, and that's it."

The line hissed. "She doesn't have a daughter," Hafidha said.

Spears spun the file around and punched numbers into her own phone.

On speaker the connection was tenuous: a beep to start the call, and then it guttered in silence until the voicemail clicked in. "Leave a message," a thin, tired woman's voice exhorted, and then it beeped.

"Phone's off," Spears said.

"Phone is registered," Hafidha added quietly, "to one Irene Czerny."

Chaz pushed up from the table. "She reported herself. She reported herself missing. Why? Is she trying to get caught?"

"Yes," Sol put in. "So why's she trying to get caught?"

"It's not a cry for help," Spears said quietly, eyes burning. "It's a goodbye letter. It's her official secession from her life."

Sol raised an eyebrow. *How?*

"I told you about mythology," Spears said, almost fevered. "About Canadian identity, and this desire to understand ourselves; to find out, somehow, who we are. She doesn't know who she is anymore, so she tries things once. She samples. She's grabbed a multicultural group of people she met doing community work, and pulled them away up north, into the literary wilderness to *find herself.*"

Chaz whistled. "Like a model society. She doesn't fit, so she'll make something that fits?"

"She kidnapped herself a community," Spears said, and shoved her phone into her pocket. "We're going to the hotel. Pack up fast. I'll find out when the next train northward leaves."

Sol put the lid on his coffee, and shouldered his bag. "We need to talk manifestation," he said, already moving; there were conversations you could have while walking, and this was one of them. "How does she get four other people to leave everything and walk off into the woods?"

"Gwen's pies," Robin Spears said, lips parted, eyes indescribable. "Gwen's dead grandfather's nonexistent pies."

And it slid together: All the little pieces and grains of sand, all the curiosities, all the telling details that made a good investigative article. "If we dig up Irene Czerny's grandfathers, they'll be bakers," he said.

Chaz's breath hissed out. "You've told yourselves very good stories about how important it is to have a cohesive society. They're connected. They're *sharing* a united identity."

"And that's why Gwen left home," Spears said, and pushed the coffeeshop door wide, letting in the streaming, bustling day. "She offered them *hope*."

*

The test results arrived on Lau's phone late in the afternoon, checked into a Minneapolis hotel room with Renee in the shower next door. *Renal function severely impaired,* Frost's precise, clipped voicemail said. *The patient has multiple indicators of impending organ failure.*

Lau lowered her phone onto the mess of dossiers; her map of the vanished I-35W bridge. Renee and her father had been near the south end; teetering too close to the edge where pavement crumpled and tore and the cold river water rushed in. Three of the cars around them had Post-It notes already: names and ages, which would turn into addresses, which would turn into a subtle monitoring, over years, for the signs of Anomalous activity.

Lau blinked. She could focus on none of it anymore.

I recommend, Dr. Frost finished, *immediate remand to Idlewood and have told Dr. Ramachandran the same*.

She hit a button and faded Frost's crisp voice away, surprised by the stab of loss. They barely knew each other. *You've barely known each other for over a year*. She'd had romantic relationships less involved than that. Friendships that were less trusting.

Lau checked her watch. The job spread across the scratchy floral bedspread was huge: She needed Art and Danny's skills, and to brief Falkner on what they'd stumbled into. She could abort this without penalty. The exposure had been out there for six whole years. For one more day, she could put it on hold.

She uncurled from the hotel bed; tapped on the washroom door. "Renee?"

The sound of tuneless singing stopped first; then the patter of water on ceramic. "Renee," she said, into that void. "I have a message from Dr. Frost. It's not good. Your kidneys." She swallowed, and pressed a cheek against the particle board. "We have to get a flight to Idlewood as soon as we can."

The silence yawned. Behind her, Hafidha's phone rang. "Yuh-huh," she said into it, and then: "Child Services is ready," and slid mismatched electric-blue socks into her shoes.

The door had opened while she turned away; she was standing a body's length away from it without having noticed, without thinking of the way arms and legs collaborated. *Damn*, she thought, as the urgency started to fade into a strange puzzlement.

"We don't have to do this," Lau said, grasping at straws, and the handwriting curled across her notepad, girlish, jagged. Deadly firm.

Come on, it said. *If I'm dying, first I'm going home.*

Act IV

There's all sorts of curious things happen. In some ways you may have gone to the North to get away from society and you find yourself far closer to it than you've ever been in your life. -- Robert A.J. Phillips, The Idea of North.

The train from Union Station left an hour before midnight: sleeper fare, stretching northward, into the darkened summer wild. These tracks had flooded like a river the night Gwen Fontaine disappeared, and still the trains ran: out of the city, north, north, a cresting wave that washed across the infiniteness of the land.

Southern Ontario scrolled by out Chaz Villette's window: trim houses into factories, into small towns and full fields; still too dark to see whose dreams they were pushing through. Gwen Fontaine had taken this trip a bit more than a week before him. Hundreds of explorers, traders, soldiers had taken this trip. If he listened, he could hear the echoes of their footsteps leaving their old lives behind.

I have two doctorates, a firearms certification, and a death sentence, he thought, as the lights of water towers blinked and swept away. *How on earth do I live a life after this? How do I live another life?*

He had let himself stop imagining it: A life without his condo, habit-worn around the edges, its block cutting board dulled by knives fitted to his hand. Hafidha in the next room, playing She Wants Revenge just at the edge of too loud and slopping coconut oil conditioner on the edge of the tub. Thursdays climbing with Tasha, quieter and lonelier now. A silent desk, in a cramped room, standing ready to eat any spare time or hows or whys with its all-consuming, hypervigilant secrets. He'd put away the fantasies of running away. Fickle, flighty, one foot out the door always, he had let himself--*made* himself, no matter how it hurt--commit.

He spread a long hand on the cool window, blotting out the trees and boulders and farms. Plans. A plan, plural. *I could be laid off from my whole life,* he thought bitterly. *Off into the great unknown.*

The train whistled, a long, low call into a space where nothing would call back. *Run,* he thought reflexively; the habit jerking like a twinged knee. *Run away before it leaves you; run away and never come back.* He shook his head, quietly; he couldn't even believe it anymore. When Todd called it a career he'd known better. It wasn't a career. It was a family; it was a home. It was a calling, of sorts, and callings followed you along the tracks; kept pace with your footsteps. They circled your trail like nightmares and bent it right back into their arms.

Stop it, Charles Travis, thirty-one years of age, he thought, and closed his hand. *You are in your family. You are committed.*

You are here.

The engine pointed north. In the wide blue seat next to him, Solomon Todd flipped a page: The Pickton trial, all over again; the jagged, kind faces of the

disappeared. Chaz fell asleep dreaming of murdered women in the mud and futures; of lines severed, or bent, or bright.

Spears nudged him out of a light, smeared doze as a precise voice announced ten minutes to a place called Hornepayne, in English and French. "This is our stop," she said, as he rubbed dreams and crumbs from his eyes.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Two-thirty in the afternoon," Sol put in behind him. "It's tomorrow."

Chaz licked parched lips; stretched muscles bunched against the pull and sway of the train. The view outside the window was partially obscured by a mustard-and-white building clad with winter siding. Above it, above the pavement, the wilderness reached up: green and blue and green again, an endless, wide-fingered sky.

He got to his feet, utterly displaced. The trees were different; the shrubbery was different. He'd dreamed himself onto another planet. "Hornepayne," he said unsteadily.

"Railway hub," Solomon Todd said, and lifted their go bags off the luggage rack. "Lumber town. And where Gwen Fontaine got off the train."

The rail station was just a trackside building, floored in slick linoleum, lined with well-worn chairs and a handful of snack machines. No one else got off beside them; the train idled for five minutes, and then chugged off into the west, without a car, without connections. Utterly alone.

Constable Spears's shoulders eased down lower than Chaz had seen them yet: Something of a small-town, rural woman coming back into breathable air. She pushed into the station and caught the eye of its one occupant: an elderly, crease-tanned, black-haired man rustling behind the ticket counter.

"*Kwey*," Spears said mildly to him, and gave a grave smile. "I'm looking for a cousin of mine, name's Gwen; about twenty-four. She came up a week back with some friends of hers from Toronto, whole group of them; white lady, and a Filipino man--"

The stationmaster's age-crinkled eyes flickered into recognition. "Oh, them. I know the girl you mean."

Spears nodded, a slow thanks. "You know which way I'd find her? Her mother's worried."

The stationmaster didn't offer comment; didn't even show a hint that he was *thinking* it. *Small-town skills,* Chaz thought ruefully as the man took him in; took the measure of Sol Todd. "I'm afraid that crew didn't stick around past one night. Their friend showed up with the truck the next morning, and they

rumbled up the highway to whatever fishing camp or hunting camp they're here for."

"Up the highway?" Spears caught it like an angler.

"You go east to Constance Lake, and then north: All that's there is camps, and then you hit the river. They did stop in Constance Lake for supplies. You might ask after her there."

"*Meegwetch*," Spears said, and ambled back to them. "I'll rent a car."

Chaz bit his lip to keep from saying: *Where?* It was a speck of a town: it sounded mostly like lumber and the wind. Spears pushed out of the station as loosely as she'd strode in, and the stationmaster watched them without full-on watching.

"I'm going to the bathroom," he said, and slunk away.

The car Spears found was someone's aging family sedan: weatherbeaten, sun-stained, still wearing its snow tires. "I gave him a hundred bucks for the day, so let's only make it one day," she said, and they piled into the car; breathed its dusty mothball heat.

"Constance Lake," Spears said, and felt in the glove box for a map. Chaz shook his phone reflexively awake, and thumbed Google Maps. There was no signal; no wireless or cell service for miles.

"Constance Lake, check," Sol said from the front, and unfolded the map in a crinkle of paper.

Spears put the key in the ignition, and steered north, away from the railway line. Chaz hunched his knees up in the back seat, every tenuous tie to the world he knew parting away.

Spears hit the gas, and there was nothing but the huge sky, and the land, and the road.

*

The house on Minnow Lane was wholly unremarkable: Another aluminum-sided building on another residential street, paint scuffed with weather and the benign years. *Spotless*, Lau thought, as the pleasant-faced staffers from Child and Family Services and Detective Saul Zingermann tapped on the door. A gruff, overly polite older white woman opened it. "That'd be Grandma," Hafidha said from the passenger seat, and peered through the windshield, stakeout-style. "She doesn't look happy."

"Who's ever happy to see Child Services?" Lau said, and gripped the wheel tight.

Zingermann had an earpiece nestled under his hat, and in the front seat, the receiver it led to crackled to life. "Ma'am," he was saying, remote and formal. "If we could just take a seat in the living room, Ms. Williams will interview Katie and Alia in the kitchen."

Trust your people, Lau thought to herself--the one thing Falkner had really drummed into her--and they listened to the footsteps echo through the Abdi-Johansen house.

She had heard it a thousand times before: A conversation made of murmurs, of voices raised in denial and shock, false or real. Just another variant of life going horrifically wrong: the horrible hours, years before, when Sufia Abdi had not known if her husband was coming home; the bitterness, the injury, the economic uncertainty when he did and the damage to his spine did not heal. Gudrun Johansen's insistent move into the guest room, and the audible shuffle of power between mother and son and daughter-in-law as they spoke over each other, cut each other off, fell into mutual silences.

"Have you ever sought counseling for the family, Ma'am?" Zingermann said: a clear voice in the fuzz, in the wilderness.

Gudrun Johansen must have raised her voice, or leaned in close to the microphone. "Counseling," she said, and it was a scoff. "Nobody here is *crazy*."

In the back of the car, something rattled: the quiet sound of a door opening and closing. Lau looked over her shoulder--but no. It was nothing.

The note fluttered through the gap in her window a minute later.

They don't believe me. They're not going to do anything.

She caught a breath. "Renee--" she started.

They're my sisters!!! landed in her lap a heartbeat later.

Hafidha opened the passenger door. "So there's no one in the back seat anymore, hm?"

"Oh, *shit,*" Lau said, and they burst out of the car, to the little perfect house and its open door.

Nikki Lau had trained, imperfectly but insistently, to recognize the signs of domestic abuse. The house was stiffly, artificially clean; you could smell the bleach wafting out the open windows. The two teenagers in the kitchen raised their heads first, alarmed: a pair of tiny, healthy Renees, well-fed but wary, hands clasped tight in their laps as the Child Services staffer spoke. A math textbook, spine cracked open, sat abandoned on the dining room table, and then Lau had burst through into the living room and Sufia Abdi--*Renee's*

mother, she realized--was on her feet next to the couch where her husband wincingly reclined.

Zingermann stood, mouth crimped tight. "What's the trouble?"

Lau tried desperately to regain an inch of her poise. "Renee."

Lau watched the name fall, pebbled, into a serene pond. The worry on Sufia's head flattened into confusion, and she reached out for her husband's hand. "Listen," Peter Johansen said roughly. "I don't know who you are, but I think you have the wrong house."

The thump that came from upstairs was loud enough to shake that house on its foundations.

Everyone looked up: Lau, Hafidha, Wilkins, Zingermann, the three Johansen adults. Zingermann resettled his cap. "Sir, Ma'am, I think I'd like to see what that noise was."

Hafidha shot a raised-eyebrow glance at Lau: *I know what that noise is.* "Stairs are where?"

It's stubborn bitchery, Lau thought, desperately, and stayed at their heels. Renee loved her little sisters. She'd left them in this house. And if it meant their safety, after three and a half years she was ready to reappear.

The upstairs of the Abdi-Johansen house was messy: splashes of everyday life still spilling from the bookshelves and linen closet. It was more honest; the havoc of a house where one parent was ill, another overworked, the third adult's household habits a constant, low-grade battleground. Two bedroom doors hung open: one painted a bloodcurdling pink gave way into twin beds, a riot of shared clothing; the other let slip a peek of a master bedroom refitted for mobility access. A third door was decorously, firmly shut.

Behind the fourth a fist thumped endlessly on the plywood door. Insistent. Not giving up.

Detective Zingermann stopped beside it, and let out a breath. "So, what'd be here?"

The strain on Gudrun Johansen's face was impossible. "We don't go in there," she said, under her breath.

The thump came again, louder, and Lau abruptly understood the tension rippling through all three Johansens' skulls: the collision between what you saw and heard and what you'd been pushed to forget. The collision of two things, equally unspeakable.

"Sir, Ma'am, I have to ask you to open that door," the Child Services staffer

said.

"We don't--" Peter Johansen started.

"Mom, goddamnit--!" Renee hollered from the other side of the door, and Sufia Abdi's face constricted with a breathtaking pain as Lau shoved open the door.

The room was full of artwork: Collages mounted and hung on poster tacks on the green-painted walls, surrounding a wood desk, an aging stereo system like well-wishers to a funeral. Three-year-old candy wrappers flaked and degraded in the sudden burst of fresh air. The bed was unmade, and had been unmade for years, the sheets frozen in stiff peaks of cotton and old sweat. Laundry lay where it fell; heaped around the hamper, underneath a faded Ke$ha poster. Everything--everything--was coated in a fine and choking dust.

Lau would not have dared disturb that tomb. But the Child Services staffer stepped across the threshold, picked up a sheet of paper from the desk, and held it up.

Familiar looping handwriting: Stronger, then, than it was now. An American History essay, interrupted, unfinished, with *Renee Abdi-Johansen* in curled blue pen at the top.

"You have a third daughter," the staffer said.

"No," Gudrun Johansen answered. "No."

"Oh God," Sufia said, wide-eyed.

"We're going to have to ask some questions down at the offices," the staffer replied, and the look on all three Johansen faces, as the long-term memory rushed in, tasted like heartbreak and dust.

*

They drove as far as they could northward, Spears at the wheel, up Highway 663; through forest and brush and past long lakes named Bluejay and Wren, until they came to the riverbank. "End of the road," Spears said, and parked the car and locked it.

There was another vehicle there, in the headwaters of that cracked highway: a blue truck, paint peeling, sawdust powdering its tailgate. Sol paced a circle around it. "Not abandoned," he said over the rush of the river, the hum of wind and animal life. "It's locked. And there's no more than a day's dust on the windshield."

Chaz leaned over his shoulder and peered inside. "Fresh coffee cup in the holder."

Spears pocketed the car keys, and they hiked into the bush.

It was hot, and dry; the foliage was thick. Roots and weeds tore at Sol's city shoes as they paced beside the chill summer current. "There's an island in that river," Chaz said, one eye on the paper map Sol had found in the car's glovebox; one eye on the greenery that swayed about his socks. "Close enough to reach the car, but still isolated. What do you think?"

Defensible, Sol assessed. You'd see or hear anyone coming long before they'd see or hear you. He brushed a blackfly off his sleeve, and another, and then gave up. "I like it," he said. "Thing is, how do we get there?"

Chaz loped along the river like a zoo-raised deer. "It's narrower here. Not by much," he called.

The current was still swift. Sol shaded his eyes: *They* had got across somehow; a boat, or a bridge. He scanned the foliage, green upon green; let the colors just fade into his eyes on the hunt for something mismatched. And--"There," he said, and pointed. "Brown canoe, pulled up onto the shore."

"That won't help us," Spears said.

"Oh, yes it will," Sol answered, and worked his way back through the brush. "Private Citizen Villette, I am about to go back to the car and fake a disturbance. Please do detain anyone who rows over to check it out."

Chaz grinned. "And here I thought you were going to lasso it or something and pull it in with your uncanny strength."

"I did tell you about that one time I traveled with the Great American Wild West Show, right?"

"You told me that one."

"Well," Sol Todd said, "I'm not as young as I was back then," and worked his way back to the loaner car.

It wasn't hard to get the rhythm of a car alarm: *Honk, honk, honk,* he pressed out steadily, and waited, a journalist in his lair. They were city kids, every one of them, three hours north of the nearest supplies. The truck was a lifeline. They *had* to check.

Ten minutes into the exercise, Spears peeked through the brush. "They're coming," she said, and beckoned Chaz forward. All three of them lurked behind the car, waiting.

The figures emerged through the flattened weeds: Christof Wyrzowski and Daniel Badi, each with a cautious hammer in hand. Chaz visibly swallowed. Todd reached for the gun he didn't have, and sighed. He braced himself--his

best weapon, himself--took his hand off the horn, and stood straight next to the car.

"Christof," he said gently. "We've been trying to find out if you were okay."

The words had impact; his slightly distant eyes sharpened, with surprise and more. *He didn't expect anyone to miss him,* Sol calculated, and let the next volley fly: "People at home are worried about you. Your boss. Your neighbors."

"Your parents and teachers and friends," Spears added softly, and Daniel Badi tucked just slightly behind the older man's leg.

"They're not mad," Chaz added, and maybe he was using his mirror, but with that look on the poor kid's face, maybe he didn't have to. "They're just worried something bad happened, and they miss you."

"You want to bring us back," Christof said. His missing persons file had put him in the city for two years; his accent was still brilliantly robust.

"We want to set everyone's minds at ease," Chaz said smoothly. "If you're happy and safe, we want to tell your friends and communities that."

The bait dangled: *If* you're happy and safe. If not, the car was right behind them; the road led to the familiar; the train would be waiting at the station stop.

"You have to talk to everyone," Daniel said haltingly; *he's shy,* Sol diagnosed. Not just from the shock, and the vagaries of recent immigration. He was a kid, and he was just plain shy. "We don't make decisions without everyone there."

"All right," Spears said easily, from behind Sol's right shoulder. "When can we go see everyone?"

"They're already waiting," Christof said, and led them down to the beached canoe.

The opposite shore was rocky and green; the path that led from it already well-worn with boots, with broken branches to each side. They followed the old man and the young teenager--walking unnaturally close for strangers, for people who'd met just a month before--single-file down the awkwardly cleared trail. "What's that?" Villette said.

Todd froze in the brush; such unfamiliar brush with its prickles and too-light green. The bang sounded irregular in the distance, impact sharp. A shotgun; no. "A hammer," he said, and they crashed through the forest, into the clear.

The disappeared men and women were building something in the round: a squat cabin of timber and hardware store nails, constructed clumsily, like a

child's drawing. Piles of rough-sawn wood hunched like sentries on the ground, around a communal water bucket and a spread of picnic remains. They hadn't gotten past the frame work, but didn't seem concerned; in a corner were five brightly colored tents. The days were long, and water close by.

They were fixing up to stay.

A short man in a stained undershirt--*Arvin Costello,* Todd realized--whistled the chorus from a folk-pop song, and dark-haired, voice rough as a crow, a young woman picked up the descant. Todd matched the face, eyes, hairline with her photo: *Gwen Fontaine*. The fear in his chest, the one he'd carried since the plane took off from Dulles or even before, loosened and transformed.

"Gwen," Constable Spears breathed, and she looked up.

No; they *all* looked up.

"Robin?" she said, and with the same bemused surprise, the white woman next to her added: "What are you doing all the way up here?"

"Looking for *you,*" Spears said, and strode to meet her. Hesitated. "Gwen, how could you just vanish like that? If you wanted to go somewhere, why didn't you *call* us and say?"

The trouble came across Gwen's bright face for just a moment: a cloud on the vibrancy of young muscles working; sweat and sunshine. "We're making something better," she said, and Todd saw it now: the distinct look of a person's mouth wrapped around another's cadences and words. "It was really important to go."

"Really important?" Spears snapped. "To terrify us so you can build a log cabin?"

And Todd recognized it: Years moving from commune to commune, the dusty optimism, the crude, half-developed skills. Ideas of construction, cultivation passed from hand to hand or sketched in the rough, like the crayon drawings of children for whom *cow* and *corn* were pictures. "Not just a log cabin. A just society, hm?" he asked softly. Not all our myths were about the end times. We dreamed, daily, that it would be better somewhere out there, somehow; if we could just get free and away.

Or at least he and his had, in the seventies. Around the same age Irene Czerny would have been, back then.

They beamed; all five of them, bright and effervescent. "We're going to do it all differently--" Arvin Costello started.

"Grow our own things--" Daniel Badi chimed in.

"Nobody else's oppression is going to reach us here," Czerny said.

The lightness on his hip tugged at Sol's whole body; ran threads into the whole situation. *You used to know other ways of dealing with things,* the young man who had traveled those communes chastised, and he forced his hand into his pocket. To finger the keys, devil duckie, wallet in there over and over again.

"That's great," Spears said, torn apart with pain. "But come Friday night, I'm going to be back home on the reserve talking drunk white kids into turning their truck around, so they don't try to beat them up some Indians."

"You don't have to," Gwen stumbled. "There's room. You can stay."

"The girl I know wouldn't say that," Spears overrode her. "The Gwen I know went to law school on a scholarship and ten potluck fundraisers with a plan to use her education to lift up her brothers and sisters, and she would never say it was all right to *leave anyone behind.*

"You shouldn't have done it," Spears snapped, teary and furious. "I can't believe you *dared.* Do you know where your mother thinks you are right now? Do you know what we all thought happened to you?"

Todd had reread the Robert Pickton case on the train: six hundred pages and six hundred miles of muck and pigs and indifference. They'd found a woman's skull cut in half with the hands and feet stuffed inside like a jewel box. A missing girl's jawbone in the pigs' slaughterhouse. They'd been addicts; they'd been prostitutes. They'd been Native, so nobody listened, and it went on for years.

That was what Robin thought had happened. That was what happened when women like Gwen Fontaine disappeared.

Gwen and Arvin and Daniel and Irene ducked their heads, the same gesture: They didn't think. In unison, in chorus, in a fever dream of a forty-year-old idea of what it was to be just, they had neglected to mention the very things that were the bread, butter, and bitterness of Gwen Fontaine's life.

"Did you forget," Robin Spears said baldly, "*who you are?*"

Yes, Todd realized, as the four of them shuffled their feet in a unison rhythm. Gwen Fontaine had forgot who she was, for a few short weeks, and it had been glorious.

Yes, and...no.

"Chaz?" he said, casual and pitched to barely carry. "What exactly d'you see?"

Chaz went still, and then his face twisted, with a thousand emotions at once; a

torrent of changeable feeling, coalescing down to one. Todd had not seen the sight in a long time: Charles Villette, absolutely struck dumb with surprise.

"It's one mind," he said, his eyes still glassy, pupils small with the mirror in his head. "Or not one, but--" his hand shaped the curve of the indescribable. "It's one the way the ocean's one body of water, but full of droplets and molecules. Little drops."

A commune, Todd thought. "You kidnapped them," was what he said.

Irene Czerny's hollowed face contorted. "Don't say that. We chose. We all chose," echoed from five mouths around him, and it was all her voice.

"No, I think you took them," Todd said, his fury pitched to sound like mild calm. "I think you picked out the one side of each of these people that made you happy, and decided the rest could go swing."

"She wasn't happy," they said. "We weren't happy."

"We're building something better, where we can be," Daniel Badi murmured, in the same tones, the same music as an older white woman from the suburbs.

"We're saving lives," Arvin Costello finished, hammer in hand, bright and proud.

"Y'know what Gwen does when she's not happy?" Robin said. "She builds something better, right there, right then. She changes what's wrong. She *fights.*"

They closed in together, a fence of bodies, a thicket: hands brushing callused hands. Chaz's eyes went pinprick again, and his mouth opened in confused anguish. "You said it wouldn't--I knew it wouldn't work--come on, you didn't; we all agreed, we talked about it for weeks and weeks."

His voice slid up and down the scale, ate pitch, register, accent as the words rolled out of his mouth. Spears stared. The line of missing people stared. "What's he doing?" Chaz whispered, and Daniel Badi's mouth rounded into an O.

The sounds from Chaz's mouth were unintelligible now: too many words, too many syllables moving at the speed of thought. The pitch raised to argument, to grief and anger and assertion. And then he threw his hands, someone else's hands up in the air, and in an accent not unlike Robin Spears's wide one, said: "If we're going to stay together, we vote. We *choose*."

Irene Czerny's face turned an unlovely, frantic red. "We can't. We can't leave me," she gasped, and held up the hammer.

"We decide *together*," four mouths snapped, four feet stomped in unison, and

Charles Villette closed his eyes, closed his mouth, and went down gasping.

From the outside, the vote looked silent. No one moved; no expression crossed any of those five faces except for Irene Czerny's: pushed farther and farther out of composure, to rage, to pain, to tears. "But I made this," she whispered, and closed her hand into a fist around that hammer. "I made us *together*."

"We made," Arvin Costello said softly. "It's not just if we can't *choose*."

Irene Czerny shrieked, a horrible, heartbroke sound, and raised the hammer--

--and it landed, clumsy with force, against her own skull.

She crumpled into doll limbs: a hammer and two weak arms against the hillock ground. A wrenching breath choked out of four mouths, and then--cacophony.

Daniel Badi's eyes went wider and wider, bright with panic, and he started to heave fat breaths. Separate, individual breaths. "Oh, Jesus," Gwen said, and looked up, hands at her temples, blood trickling from her nose.

"Oh, Jesus," Arvin Costello breathed, heartbroken, and folded double in on himself.

Sol felt down Irene Czerny's arm for a pulse: still alive. Concussed, likely, and in need of the kind of bed rest you couldn't get out in the bush. But the blow hadn't been strong enough to jar her brain into shutdown.

A shadow lapped him; he looked up, and saw Christof Wyrzowski. Looking at Irene, at the cabin, at his own blistering hands. "I will stay," he said quietly, and knelt beside Irene to brush the torn grass from her sleeves. "We will take care of each other, her and I."

Spears loomed over them abruptly. "We're not leaving you here. She needs medical attention. You're in the bush."

His expression twisted. "Constance Lake, then. Take us there. But that will be it."

Sol met his eye. "You sure?"

The older man looked around at the bones of the cabin; at the greenery run riot, the bright blue sky. "City life was not good for me," he said, and brushed the hair from Irene Czerny's face like a kind brother. "Take them home. Just get us to Constance Lake."

Sol rose, and left them, together and chosen so, on the verdant grass. Walked back to the knot of people where Chaz spoke low to Daniel Badi about safety and home in the language all once-frightened children could still share; to

Robin Spears grimly standing, exhausted, parade-posture straight.

To the sound of Gwen Fontaine sobbing; sobbing like a boxer, her arms wrapped around Arvin Costello to hold him up and push him, gentle as a feather, back into the ring.

*

Nicolette Lau was supposed to be in transit: On a commercial flight home, trailing Hafidha and Renee, who had left directly for Idlewood that morning. There were maps to make, and lives to chart: radiating out like beams of light from that bridge fallen in the Mississippi River to lives and homes unknown.

She wasn't. She was standing on the doorstep of the house on Minnow Lane.

Lau had gone over the justifications thoroughly in the car: What happened if Peter Johansen cracked from the pressure of this week? If the anomalous passenger he and his oldest daughter shared woke, and panicked, and spored? They needed something. They needed a warning of what could happen; what had happened to the daughter they couldn't remember. What might tear them apart all over again.

It was all simple bullshit. Nikki Lau was here because Renee was going to Virginia to die, and she needed to tell that narrow, worried woman what had happened to her oldest daughter.

Her knock echoed through a hollowed-out house; a ghost of the ghost-noises Renee had hollered in her dead bedroom. It was years before Sufia Abdi answered it, instantly older; sleeves covered in dust. *She's been going through Renee's room,* Lau thought, with a little leap of hope. *There's a chance. She still cares.*

"Ms. Abdi," Lau said, and the seamed, tired eyes turned down into a wary frown.

"They're still down at the station," Sufia Abdi said tightly. Her husband; her mother-in-law. Her children, whose home and financial future would be in jeopardy now that Gudrun Johansen was under investigation by the police for Renee's flight from home.

"I know," Lau said, thrown and trying not to be. "I was hoping to speak with you privately. About Renee."

Lau had already seen Child and Family Service's recommendation. Renee Abdi-Johansen's two wary sisters would stay in their home, with their parents, under the guidance of a social worker. All five of them would start the family counseling they should have had years before. Gudrun Johansen would live offsite, in a separate residence, and slowly, hopefully, her tangle of fear and rage and obligation could be unraveled, without unduly blaming a child for

her son's broken back.

And no one else would have to leave home and die alone.

There is no justice, Lau thought bitterly, for half a second, before she squelched it. Justice was not unidirectional, or uncomplicated; there was no one person that justice was *for.* If you did it right, it spilled like groundwater.

If she did this right, Renee's sisters would grow up safe, and Renee wouldn't be left high and dry.

"She's ill," Lau said, fast. "She's been living in the shelter system for three and a half years, and she has a condition--it's going to be terminal, one day. I want you to know you can visit her. You can still tell her you love her. She misses you. She loves you."

Through the narrow crack between door and frame, house and wilderness, inside and out, Sufia Abdi closed her careworn eyes.

"My card," Lau said, and held it out; a cycle complete. A circle, back to the beginning she hadn't even known she was making. "Take it, please. If you ever want to write her, to talk to her--we can do it. She'll be living in a medical facility in Virginia. I don't know how long she has. But if you can go down, she'll be waiting."

Renee's mother looked at the card in Lau's hand; at the paved walk, the summer weeds on the lawn, the driveway empty of family cars, the clear, untroubled blue sky.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"But--"

"We have two daughters," Sufia said firmly, and shut the door in Nikki Lau's face.

Lau reached into her pocket and clutched the picture inside; palmed from the mantel as Child Services led Renee's parents away.

Three smiling faces, all in a row.

Act V

The North does show you exactly how much you rely on your fellow man, what the sense of community means. The sense of community in the North, unlike in the South is a matter of life and death. The thing about the North of course in personal terms is that in the North you feel it's so big. It's so vast. It's so immense. It cares so little. And this sort of diminishes you and then you think My God, I am here. I've--I've got here. I live here. I live. I breathe. I

walk. I laugh. I have companions. -- James Lotz, The Idea of North.

It was June, sun shining through a rain that gathered and pooled in her sneakers, and Gwen was picking cherries when the question came: "If you could start again, start a utopia, what would you do?"

She didn't answer right away; she was perched ten feet in the air on a slippery ladder, and her hands were full of bright red fruit. "Pass me the bucket?" she said, and Arvin shaded his glasses. They'd picked together before, a handful of times last summer. Still, she barely knew him. He wasn't the talking type.

"Hold on," he said. "It's all full of rain."

"Cherry rain," little Daniel said with a laugh, and tilted the water so Gwen could see.

The white bucket was rich with dilute red juice: cherries pressed under their own weight, under the weight of the water, burst and flavoring it into something bright. "Think we can drink it?" Arvin asked.

"Either it's great or we'll die."

"Well," Irene said, with a sudden glint in her eye, "death pact."

They might die, but it was delicious: cool and clean and sweet. All the promise of the short summer that had just barely arrived swirled deep in the back of her throat. "Oh man, give that back," Daniel said, and they passed the bucket, water bottles dipping, a drinking horn, a feast dish; shared and intimate as a childhood ceremony.

Sacrament, she heard, a susurrus, a whisper. The first rustle of something sweet vining out, binding her, so solitary, into this awkward group of the uprooted. *We drink and it's a sacrament.*

Their hands moved, in slow concert: plucking the sweet fruit, cherry-juice-stained, sorting and brushing between the soft green ovals of its leaves. She was perched on the cherry's wide branch; she was hefting the white bucket high; she was striped with warm rain, dripping, the slick ladder tight under her hands.

The silence stretched out through the late afternoon, between the rustle of cherry leaves and summer rain. She closed her eyes and still saw: The scuff of a wet sneaker and hands that were her neighbors' hands. Five bodies, choreographed perfect, together: *What shall we build?*

And for a moment, all things were possible, and it would never fall apart.

*

The boarding pass was stiff enough to fold into a telescope. Chaz Villette

rolled it up and peered through it: at the table lamps of the departure lounge, the small airplanes outside the window, Solomon Todd sitting next to him with his cell phone in his hand. The world narrowed. That was what it did. You grew older, and your choices fossilized, and the aperture got smaller, like--there.

"What are you doing, Charles?" Todd asked without looking up.

Chaz shut his eyes. Blocked out the pinprick universe. "Grim philosophy," he said, and put another biscuit in his mouth. "What are you doing?"

"Goopily texting my girlfriend," Sol said, and hit send.

World saved again for this calendar hour. Over by eleven if that's all right?

The reply came near-immediately: *I'll b up*, in Mehitabel's own mix of punctilious grammar and the kind of text-speak Sol expected from a thirteen-year-old. *I luv u. C U soon.*

Mehitabel put the phone down on the kitchen table and picked back up her battered copy of *Great Expectations*. It was a third-hand edition: One of the few modern ones that had Dickens' original ending. "'I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview,'" she read to herself, softly, wrapped in the smell of cooling rosemary and white bean soup and the taste of dark black tea, "'for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.'"

It was a much better ending, she thought. An ending for when one grew old and in love with the thought of compassion. An ending for people who had lost.

It was much better.

I took her hand in mine, Bekk Falkner read, *and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.*

Bekk Falkner turned the last page of *Great Expectations* and set it down on her desk: Another reading assignment crossed off the list. It had been her decision to stay in Minnesota for the summer semester and pick up a few breadth courses: long days of sitting under flowering trees to read great works of literature. The tree roots were rough on her butt muscles, and there were an unfortunate number of ants and mosquitoes, and apparently you couldn't read under trees romantically once twilight hit. She rubbed her eyes. Almost eight in the evening. Not too late to pick up the phone.

She dialed the long-distance card numbers, and then, on a hunch, her mother's

office line. The hunch paid off: "SSA Falkner," her mother said, faraway and official, professional and stiff-straight.

"Mom?" she said, and it was *Mom,* not *Ma* or the supremely annoyed *Mother*, because she was feeling affectionate. Esther Falkner's voice buzzed on the other end of the line; tired, as always. The sound of massaged temples, and a smile, and worn-down eyes.

"Hey there, Penguin," she said. "Everything all right?"

Bekk had two theories on why her mother always asked that: Her survivor grandparents' influence, long made an anxious habit, or a slow conviction from the work she did that things mostly weren't all right, ever.

"Everything's fine," she said, and hesitated. "I just wanted to say hi."

I just wanted to hear your voice. It was so strangely hard to say that to your mother when you'd chosen to stay away.

"Oh," her mother said, as if she understood exactly. "How's Blackstock?"

"Empty," she said, and curled into her chair. Relieved. "The whole town just dies out for the summer. It's just the staff and the high school kids and the other summer program types."

"But you're making friends, right?"

Bekk's mouth curved. Her mother: Always worrying. Always trying so badly to hide it. "I'm making friends," she said. "Yeah."

"Hey, how's this: I've got two lines here. I'll call home and conference in your dad and sister."

And in the darkened office, home to far too many cut ties, missing photographs, fans whirring to lonely people toiling in the dark, Esther Falkner slid her door closed and opened a new line on the phone.

Two doors farther down, Hafidha Gates trawled Facebook with one hand; the rest of her focused on trying not to think about the e-mail open behind it. When you could feel bytes and pixels like mosquito bites on your arms you couldn't just slam another window over the things that hurt to see. But she'd roughed and shoved her way through damn near everything--*everything but death, babygirl,* the Bug reminded--and it was too late to learn how to walk away.

Susannah Greenwood has opted to undergo the chip implantation procedure, it said, in Casey Ramachandran's habitual dry, clinical tone. *Given the stellar work you and Special Agent Lau did to help bring Renee here, I'd love to see you take on a mentorship role. She's still young, and she'll have questions.*

Could you make a few hours a week to give her answers?

All of Hafidha Gates's report cards had pegged her as a natural leader: Bright, enthusiastic, eager for responsibility. If they could only see now how her hands shook.

She'd taken on a little sister once: done all the *Here's where the girls washroom is* and *here's where the cute boys sit.* Gave advice, leaned together. And lost, and lost, and lost.

"I'll be terrible at this," she told herself, staring at endless Flash game status updates. "I'm a broken old foulmouthed Goth baby. She's a twenty-one-year-old rich white girl who grew up in Cape Cod."

Chaz wasn't here to dry the tears, this time; to explain them away with psych theory and a double helping of kimchi dumplings. For the first time in months, she faced it down, luxuriant: Someone needed her, painful as it was to consider, and she had to deal with it all by herself.

She didn't even need to type the scrolling reply. *Casey, I hate you. You are the worst doctor in the world. I can't get away until Sunday so you're going to have to wait 'til then.*

Hours away, in his soft-carpeted office at Idlewood, Casey Ramachandran's e-mail pinged, and he let out a breath held in hope--for both of them; two patients caught in limbo--and smiled.

The sounds of Idlewood at its uneasy rest creaked and groaned through the foundations: the shuffle of an orderly's footsteps on her ceaseless night patrols; elevators rumbling through the wooden floorboards; the mutter, soundproofed into nothingness, that was a too-familiar scream.

Down the hall, in a room specially prepared with two solid doors and plenty of note paper, Nikki Lau toyed with the remains of a half-chewed Clif Bar. "I'm sorry," she said, and looked away from the cat door installed just that morning and the notepad inside.

The notepad stayed blank: light blue lines on yellow paper, covered with the dents of crossed-out, furious scribbling. Through the window, the wastepaper basket scattered yellow paper, torn small like confetti, like cut-out stars.

The picture was on the bedside table, though: Three brown girls, smiling, eyes like stars.

"Child Services has a file now," Lau said, more and more ineffectually. More aware than ever of the limits of her two hands. "They've done a quick home study, and talked to your sisters' teachers. Detective Zingermann says it'll be hard to get charges to stick, because you can't take the stand just yet, but he'll make sure they're safe. He'll take," she quoted, "'a personal interest.'"

She waited ten minutes for the answer: written in a looping scrawl that was familiar-unfamiliar, precisely penned. *How do we find a cure?*

"Casey's going to try his best--"

Outside her line of sight, the notepaper rustled. *A cure for not being seen.*

Vicious tears sprang to Nikki Lau's eyes, and she dashed them economically away. *Jesus Christ, I don't know.* Her own exterior turned the page, expressionless; frictionless by design. Frictionless from years of practice at showing only glimpses and professional smiles.

Look at me was the thing you were never supposed to say. And here she was, saying it.

"I see you," Lau said.

The voice was a memory of a conversation, half-dreamed once. "You know that's not enough," it said.

Lau closed her eyes. "Yeah," she answered. "But I do. And you see me. Maybe it's a start."

Through the porthole, two chill fingers whispered across her palm, almost there; a memory of a memory. Lau closed her hand around them, and squeezed tight as long as she could.

The nurse tapped on the door. "Agent Lau? We're closing to visitors for the night."

"Right," she said, through the lump in her throat, and the fingers untangled. *I'll forget them before I even cross the hall,* she thought bitterly. And then: *No. Damn it, I will not.*

Dr. Ramachandran was waiting in the visitors' lobby, a clipboard in hand; never without paperwork, even at nine at night. "Thank you," he said again, "for bringing Renee in."

Lau nodded. And asked the question she asked herself every day, beforehand and then after, late at night: "Were we in time?"

Ramachandran did the medical equivalent of a shrug. "It's hard to say, this early. Her kidneys are in rough shape. Just having a stable diet will help with that, and dialysis will mitigate the damage. We've also done her neural imaging, and if we can isolate where her manifestation activates, neurologically speaking, we might be able to effect an intervention."

"An intervention," Lau echoed.

"Turn it off," he explained, and leaned against the wall. "With the chip

technology, if we need to. But we're going to start a program of meditation, visualization and cognitive therapy tomorrow morning."

And maybe she will live, Lau thought. A little longer. A few more precious years.

"Nikki?" Ramachandran said, wary as a cat. "Everything all right?"

She felt the memory of a memory of ghostly fingers laced in hers, holding on for dear life. Not just for dear life: In friendship. In affection and trust.

Lau closed her hand around her cool palm. "No," she said plainly.

It was a beginning.

*

"Reason for visiting Canada?" the customs officer had asked at pre-clearance, and Chaz Villette told her: "I was visiting a friend."

Todd hadn't said anything through the runup to departure, but with their luggage safely secured and the plane wobbling through the air, ascendant, he looked up from his true crime paperback. "I hope they don't check your international smuggling excuse."

Of course: Even back behind the yellow line, Solomon Todd had been paying attention.

"It's technically true," Chaz said. "And I do have a friend there."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," was all he answered. *But we haven't talked in years.*

The other thing Chaz had forgot about commercial flights was the boredom: creased airline magazines read by a thousand other hands, no music, no good coffee on the boil. No space to have a conversation even remotely pertinent or classified. *We're spoiled on that jet,* he realized, with a weird chill. *Don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.*

Onboard internet access was almost ten bucks. He shelled out and navigated the dusty online trails from a Livejournal to a website, to a Twitter feed and a Facebook that was locked down to prying eyes. Clicked the link over and read.

He had a friend in Canada, and she lived across town with a boyfriend now; a tall, narrow man with gentle eyes. The plumber had come last week. The day before she'd picked mulberries from a neighbor's tree for a crisp. He paged back, farther; through gaps and daily details and book reviews.

She was still using his recipes. She still made his sourdough bread.

The tendril of affection surprised him: Its presence, and its tenacity. Years later, invisible and estranged, he'd *mattered.*

He flicked the cursor to *Message,* and hesitated.

She had never been the happiest person: There were always hints of trouble in the gaps between her words, the kinds of hints he had been specially trained to catch. But they weren't there anymore. He scrolled back, and back, and back.

She was happy. She had a *life.*

Without you, he thought reflexively, and then stopped himself. No. Without him, only and solely because he had chosen not to stay. Stopped answering the birthday wishes, stopped saying anything serious, stopped all those little signs of care that showed you were part of a society greater than yourself.

It's not mind-reading that's your greatest talent, Charles Villette, he told himself. It was professionalism; it was not staying involved. Detachment and objectivity.

It was, time and again, walking away.

On a commercial flight, he couldn't talk shop; peruse files; bury himself in the details of other people's tragedies. Chaz swirled the cursor.

Opened a new window, and put his fingers on the keys.

Hey, guys. I know it's been a while. But I've missed you. So here's what's happening in Platypus World.

The seatbelt sign pinged on, as the plane shuddered and bucked again. He hit post and sat back, into the pit of worry that had just opened between his narrow ribs.

The flight attendants moved catfooted down the aisle. "Sir," the taller one said. "I'll have to ask you to stow your electronic devices."

Chaz nodded absently and flipped the laptop shut. The sky had gone dark while he'd been typing; above them, below them, were masses of grey and twining clouds. He watched them twist together into heavy weather.

"And here I was hoping to see the Washington Monument," Sol said.

"If you're good," Chaz said, absently.

"I try to be every day," Sol intoned.

The lights in the cabin dimmed, Stygian, washed everything grey. "Passengers, please remain in your seats. We're looking at a little turbulence coming up," said the PA.

And the plane rocketed homeward, into the storm.

*

Well, I think like a large number of people who end up in the North, I sort of got there by mistake. -- James Lotz, The Idea of North.

4.12 "Asylum" - by C.L. Polk and Elizabeth Bear

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Ashton, VA, April 30, 2014

"So here you are again," Saito says. "Danny-boy. With your trampled-on fear all muddled up. Got anything new for me?"

"Stubbed my toe this morning," Brady replies.

"And you had *sex,*" Saito complains. "Snuggly wonderful dawn-time cuddling. You had a good lunch. You're not even *hungry*. Must you antagonize me like this?"

"Unexpected consequence," Brady says. "Desensitization."

"You're not living up to the deal. Give me something."

"Doing my best."

"I hate slow periods," Saito complains. "Waiting for the other shoe to drop. For you to break up with your boyfriend or have a teammate die. That grief felt good, Dann-O. Felt like the first time. But-- Not today. You're in a good mood."

"It's been good lately," Brady says. "Sorry."

"You have something in there," Saito says. "Something you're covering up in all that fluff. Nobody knows you like I do. How's your monster on work release?"

Screw you, buddy. "She's fine."

"For now. Until she isn't fine. And it could happen in a blink."

"She's fine."

"You're boring today," Saito complains. "Can't even get you past worried

about your team monster. I could do that. Be on your team. I have a knack for interviews. I can really get down deep."

"You're never getting out of this room, Jason."

"And you're not the deal I bargained for. Give me Dallas. *Chicken in the bread pan, picking out dough...* No," Saito says, and jerks backward against his chair in frustration. "Give me Hafidha Gates."

"She's fine," Brady repeats.

"Have you stayed at the office while she was in the field? Have you let her out of your sight yet?"

"She's been in the field without me there." That's a mistake. Defensive.

"Ooh. There's something," Saito says. "Give me that."

"It's nothing."

"Liar." Saito sits up, settles back. "She did something that makes your spine crawl. Give it to me. It'll do."

*

Leesburg, VA

Her shroud wasn't even finished yet.

Ash had started it right after seeing an episode of *Six Feet Under* with a green burial. People thought it was morbid and creepy. "Way too goth, even for you," Jessica had said, while Ash searched for undyed linen cloth and researched plant dyes for the silk floss she'd dye herself. But you understood. Death is a part of life, and abstract at nineteen.

Ash hadn't abandoned it as a teenage fancy. She cut the linen, stitched it by hand, dyed the thread with berries and leaves and bark, stitched pictures and words and signs. She took it out on each of the sabbats and on her birthday to stitch on it. If she only got a little done, she'd shrug, smile, and put it back in its box to wait for the next time. There's enough time left when you're nineteen, when you're twenty-four, when you're not even married yet, when you're only twenty-six.

But it wasn't finished. The needle had still been threaded through a line of madder-dyed silk; at the spring equinox she'd been stitching a glyph she'd designed herself that meant gentleness. You don't know how it was supposed to finish, and so you pushed the needle through in a simple running chain to write the date of her death, and to mark the approximate places where her heart, kidneys, and eyes would have been--what the transplant people took, before they disconnected her from the machines. The sun, the scales, the ram's

head. This was your job: Even though you didn't believe anymore, you knew the signs and symbols, you knew her meaning.

You couldn't bear to help wash her body, or to braid her long, long hair into the crown she liked the most. Couldn't bear to look at the bruises and the fractures that would never heal, the sutures from the transplants raised and ugly on her skin. No one minded that you couldn't. And so you sat in the room outside and stitched the last clumsy marks that weren't enough. Someone always came to touch your shoulder to see how you were doing, if you needed anything. Ash's brother, Connor, came to help you pack herbs in the pockets of the shroud, and Ash's mother, Sandra--that name was awkward on your tongue, she'd always been Mrs. Campbell--walked you to your car parked under the magnolias and gave you one more hug before you went home to sleep before the ceremony.

*

They arrange to fetch you in the car hired for the family. No one wears black. Ash would have hated it. Most wear green, her favorite colour--you're wearing a deep loden green shawl around your shoulders, fastened with her favorite shawl pin--a copper lance and a knotwork ring. Connor takes your hand to help you out of the car and holds it as you walk. You squeeze it because that's what you're supposed to do. Because it's supposed to feel comforting.

You leave your shoes outside the place marked as the entrance to the circle, and walk the spiral, turning inward. Ashley's mother respected her religion the way your parents wouldn't have, back when you believed it, too. She had talked to the people in Ashley's circle, and let them do everything the way they thought Ash would want it. Your bare feet grow cold as you turn widdershins through the spiral and find your place in the inner ring of mourners. Her family. Her circle. And you.

You're cold. Everything sounds far away, unimportant. The shroud isn't finished, but it's wrapped around her body, small and motley with the embroideries of wheels and constellations, a map of Ash's own meaning and what she wanted to set down to mark her life.

There should be more. There shouldn't be an inch of beige left unmarked, and the *wrongness* of that latches hold surely as Connor's hand and scrapes at the edges of emptiness, the unreality.

This shouldn't be happening.

Then there's a soft press just over your left shoulder, a wisp of honey and sandalwood teasing through the air, and the batting over your senses peels away--the moisture in the air, the cool bluegrass under your bare feet, Connor's hand holding yours tight and the brilliant blue sky and oh, deep in

the center of your chest, it *hurts* and claws up your throat in a horrible jagged sob, the first you've cried since that first denying scream over the telephone

a car crash

the other driver killed immediately, Ash airlifted out with a massive head injury, unable to breathe unassisted

She had been coming to your house.

Work had been the absolute shits. Even knowing that you were walking straight into a universal PMS zone didn't make it any easier to handle. When Sam and Tyrone had laughed just as you'd gone around the corner--it probably hadn't been about you but fuck it made you want to turn around and demand to know*what* was so fucking funny and even a run through the trail and splitting wood to refill the wall of split logs didn't take the tension out of your shoulders, didn't dull the need to start a fight.

You had complained to Ash as much as your nondisclosure agreement would allow, and your best friend, your heart-sister, said, "Take a shower, use the salt scrub, we're going to unblock your cramped-up energy and then we can watch any Jane Austen movie you want."

"I love you," you'd said, not knowing it was the last time. "And your crystal-hugging bodywork."

When she wasn't there a half hour later, you assumed she'd decided to pick up something to eat.

After an hour, you sent her a text.

The phone rang ten minutes later.

*

You can't stop crying now. Connor and Sandra have their arms around you, and you can't stop, she's gone, because she was coming to your house because you couldn't even stop sulking long enough to make the drive from Purcellville to Leesburg to make good on your weekend plans, she's dead

because of *you*

They get you back to the car somehow, and you try to take slow breaths that don't hitch, and when your sinuses clear, you smell honey and sandalwood again, and wonder if you're going crazy.

Sandra takes you home to the big house surrounded by deep Virginia woods. She tucks you into bed as if you were sick and reads *Sense and Sensibility* to you until the pills take hold and you fall asleep.

You dream of Ash teaching you to dance the strathspey in this house. You dream of the first day you met at your new school. You are both fourteen, and you never want to wake up.

But you do.

*

Ashton, VA

Hell is beautiful in the spring.

Dice bumps the driver's-side door closed with his hip and balances a grocery sack and a cardboard box on one hand and double-checks the lock. Actually two boxes: one destined to stay at the door for Leon and his partner after the mandatory search is done, the other to go upstairs, not down, up to the activity room, where Eddie and a guard will wait.

They might play chess, with Eddie able to move his pieces himself. Dyson's read up on sports scores, but Eddie may have already seen them himself on the television, and he'll listen.

Leon takes the boxes of kolache with *thanks, you shouldn't have, I could never eat two boxes by myself* and a big laugh before they go do the usual search. Leon doesn't ask the question again, and then Dyson Cieslewicz heads in a new direction from his usual route to the high security area and the support group meeting in the vast and empty cafeteria--to a smaller wing, with only a handful of residents.

Two of them are standing out by the nurse's station, accompanied by the usual complement of quiet, watchful staff. Dice smiles at the first, a slender young woman.

"Hey, Susanna."

She smiles back, after a delay and a half-halted wave, then she slips into a room and shuts the door quietly, avoiding any further contact, but the other woman turns around and smiles widely.

"Dice," Natalie Summers says.

"Natalie," Dice answers, and up his arms come, a mirror of hers as they step closer together and hug. it's a close squeeze, though Dice is one-armed because of the second box of kolache and the grocery sack, but when they step apart Natalie's got a light in her eyes. Her red hair is natural, from the soft fuzz on her head, but not as vivid as he was used to seeing it, and she reminds him of a young Sinead O'Connor, with huge eyes and the hollows of her cheeks filling in a little.

"It's so nice to see you," she says. "I've met your brother." She acts like the guard standing just out of reach and to her right is personal security. She's probably used to having personal security.

"And now you know everything." Dice laughs.

Natalie lays a tan-gloved hand on his arm as she laughs along.

"Hardly. Kylie was just here," Natalie says. "Last Sunday."

"Oh, good! Good," Dice says, and sets the box down at the nurses' station occupied by Sam, who isn't a nurse but was studying to be one, and rocks back on his heels. "I'm glad."

"Me, too. She never stopped being my friend, Dice."

Dyson already knows. Kylie wrote him a message on Sunday. "That's good."

"Is your brother okay?" Natalie asks, and Dyson can't hide the expression that goes with his stomach dropping to the floor. "It's probably nothing," she says quickly. "He's not in observation, but he's been keeping to himself today and yesterday, and you can't usually get him away from the windows in the recreation room. He sits in the sunlight," Natalie says.

"Should I tell him that you were wondering if he was all right?" Dyson asks, and she shakes her head--and then changes her mind and nods.

"It's good to know that somebody's thinking about you," she says. "Susanna was, too."

"I'll tell him," Dyson promises.

Natalie goes off to the TV room. Eddie comes out not long after, smirking at Dice.

"The rich girl talks about you, brother."

"She asked if you were doing all right. She says Susanna was worried about you, too."

"The kid? No fooling. Wasn't feeling social. Let's play some chess."

Dice plays because Eddie likes to. They start a Catalan opening by silent agreement, and leave the clock off. Eddie doesn't rest his left arm on the table, doesn't talk much, glancing at the other end of the room where Natalie sits and watches a show with vampires of some kind.

"You sure there's nothing going on there?" Eddie asks, and Dice nods.

"I'm sure."

"Not like you could go on dates with her anyway. She's got the treatment already."

"Ah."

"She's already going for walks," Eddie goes on. "I'm not even at walks yet."

"When you get there, do you want to take a spin around the gardens?"

"You should go on a spin with her."

"Eddie."

"Okay, okay. But she likes you, man."

"I know she likes me, but it's not like that."

"Like you and that tattoo babe you date."

"We go to the movies together sometimes."

"But it's not like that," Eddie grumbles, and his left shoulder rises until he notices it and shoves it back down. "Can't you just get laid?"

"Eddie."

"Okay, okay. You're seriously into this sensitivity cra-- stuff. Why not get your leg over?"

"How would Natalie feel if I used her like that?"

"Fucksake, Dice. You never fucking quit. It pisses me off."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," Eddie says. "Never mind. Let's do some chess."

Dice reaches for his knight, and squeezes the horse head, resisting the urge to take his hand away. "J'adoube."

"No kidding j'adoube. I wouldn't have let you make that move when I was twelve." But Eddie doesn't give a suggestion or hint, letting Dice figure out an alternative.

Eddie wins eight moves later, shakes his head at the hint of another game. "Eat one, or you won't get one."

He means the poppyseed, their favorite. They eat in silence, watching the last minutes of the visit tick by, and Dice knows that he can't tell Eddie. Not yet.

"Well, I better get going," Dice says, and Eddie dusts crumbs off his hand.

"Yeah, you wanna get home soon. You doing that--that polo thing, with your

bicycle?"

"Yeah." Eddie approves of bike polo. It's daring. He's proud of every scrape and bruise Dice gets, because a funny story about pain is one of the ways he takes the measure of a man.

Dice swipes his hands over a paper napkin before he shakes hands with Eddie. Good firm grip. Look him in the eye. Half a smile.

"Take it easy," Dice says, and turns to go. He makes it to the door before Eddie speaks again.

"Dice."

"Yeah, Ed?"

"I'm sorry I hurt your hand."

"It's okay," Dice says. It's out before the surprise at the apology even hits. "It's okay, little brother."

*

Leesburg, VA, May 1, 2014

You know you're awake, but you can't move because sharp, heavy claws are digging in and holding you down. You don't want to look at the mirror to the side of Ash's bed, but all you can move is your eyes and they track inevitably to the closet doors.

There's the hump of your hip, and the sharp drop of your shoulder. No beast digging painfully into your ribs, crushing your breath. But it's there, pressing the breath out of you, and you can't remember the words of protection, you can't call the white light to you so you think, *Help me, Ashley.* The tingling warmth touches the crown of your head and melts the beast away.

All at once you're ... awed. The tingling brushes over you and you shove down the thought that it's just ASMR and not what you feel when magic happens. You were wrong. You doubted, when you lost the feeling after--

No. Hold the light. Hold the magic. You've got it back, and that warmth and light and radiance just behind you is Ash.

She's come back, to save you. To show you that it really is real. Even though it's your fault she's dead.

It's not. I'm here. I'll leave you your privacy but I'll come when you need me.

It feels so good. As good as it felt when Ashley did Reiki with her hands just over your skin, as good as it felt when she would whisper you through a walk through the forest. Ashley could always stop the fear. Ashley could always

make it safe. You keep your back to her, because if you turn and can't see her it will be harder to believe.

You keep believing until you fall asleep again.

When you wake up, you're starving. But now you're not alone.

Act II

Somewhere in Virginia, May 4, 2014

The road to Hell is in bloom.

Dice drives, Tyler rides shotgun, circular needles in his lap and his knitting pattern clipped to the passenger visor. They're on a Sunday drive to their support group, one where everyone is coming in.

"So how's Eddie enjoying being upstairs?" Tyler asks, watching the country road go by.

"I dunno. Mixed signals. Apparently he stays in his room a lot. Then he got on my case about how I should date Natalie."

"You should not do that," Tyler answers. "What on Earth."

"She's beautiful, she's rich, and she's doing really well, and Eddie is the sort of person who thinks a woman paying sincere attention to you wants you in bed."

"Yow. Okay! So I'm guessing you didn't tell him."

"I didn't tell him," Dice agrees. "I kind of pitched it out the window. I don't think it was a good time."

"Nothing says you have to come out to anyone, you know. You get to decide who you want knowing that," Tyler says. The knitting ends up in his hands, yarn wound around his fingers.

"I know, but it seems wrong. You guys all know. My brother? He doesn't know. I ought to tell him."

"Because he's your family?"

"Yeah. But he's, you know, he's--"

"Lacking in social empathy."

"That's so nice it swims under the point. But he's different. He doesn't say so much of that stuff lately. I wondered if he figured it out."

"Don't tell him until you feel like you're ready."

The miles wind by--some in silence, but Tyler mentions his workload at school, and Dice tells him about his new project at work to bring in a bottled beer from each state and territory, until Dice has to ask.

"Still don't want to see Natalie?"

"I still don't," Tyler agrees. "I dunno. I worry that she'll see it as a sign that all is forgiven and it's not. I don't know how much of that school year was real. I don't know how much she pushed me."

"I get you."

"I can't trust her. I hope she's getting better, but she's an alleged serial killer. I'm not even sure I want to encounter another one."

"You're going clinical, though."

"Irony, right?" Tyler chuffs out a laugh and digs around for his water bottle. "Oh, hey. Do you think Rupert Beale will be there? I want to ask him about how he decides what to write and what not to write. When it comes to the anomaly, I mean."

"I almost want to listen to that. I don't know if he'll be there or not, though."

*

Purcellville, VA

Purcellville's gentrifying. You've watched it happen ever since you moved into your house, tiny on its big lawn compared to the houses that have gone up around it. When the new neighbors move in, they don't talk to you, till one by one everyone you knew on the street is gone, to foreclosures or simply an offer they couldn't refuse, and the pressure for you to follow suit is on. They don't see you when you mow the lawn. They don't see you when you rake the leaves. They don't see you when you shovel the walk and the drive. Their eyes slide off your Jetta, snug in the driveway.

But somehow, you can't mow that lawn now without feeling the eyes. You're out in a singlet and work pants, a trashed pair of ex-work boots. You know what they think of your man's job, the easy loping pace you set on the trail run, the cuts and curves of your shoulders, your arms. A woman living alone, her only visitor another woman, a woman with no makeup and a bodybuilding habit, a woman of speed, strength, endurance. You push the manual mower the same as you shovel the drive and the corner lot's stretch of sidewalk--at a patient pace you can keep up for twenty minutes, hydrate, and back at it. The neighbors use contraptions they can drive around--the neighbors who do their own landscaping and snow clearing, anyway.

You know what they think of Ash and you. It's no different than what they

thought in school, what they thought at the dances, what they thought at the coffee cauldrons and open circles and spirit gatherings.

Who cares what they think? And who would care even if they were right?

You stop in your tracks. You stand up straight and inhale slowly, trying to catch the smell of sandalwood and honey. It's just cut grass, that's all, but you swear you heard it, like Ash was just there--and you're sure that she is, just behind you. You can feel her. You can--smell her.

She can't be there.

But she is.

"You're not there," you whisper, and an oriole sings above your head.

Because I'm dead? Em. Do you think I would leave you alone? I know you haven't reached out to anyone. Not even Connor.

"Connor's got his own thing. He doesn't want me hanging around."

Connor loves you.

"I know," you say, and start pushing the mower again, grass blades flying into heaps.

Not like a brother.

"I can't," you say, and turn with your eyes shut.

The sense of Ash follows you back toward the house.

"I can't," you mutter again, but there's no answer, and after a while the feeling of Ash goes away. You push the mower until your phone buzzes the time, and you stop right where you are and drink a glass of water from the pitcher on the porch, the ice in it melted to little floating pebbles.

"All that yard with a push mower," a voice says, and you turn around.

The man halfway down your driveway smiles. He's tan, wearing a crisp white shirt, no jacket, no tie, but those pants have a jacket somewhere. His hands are in his pockets, no briefcase, no bright brochures.

"Shovel the walk by hand, too," you say, and put one hand on your hip.

"A dedication to lower emissions, or fitness?"

"Spend an hour a day working out," you say. "Reckon yardwork's like Zumba."

"I can't see you in a Zumba class," the man says, and sandalwood tickles your nose.

"Don't look light on my feet, then?"

What's he want? Ash says, and you take a long breath in through your nose trying not to let your shoulders fall in relief. You know she's not real.

But having her there feels so good.

I don't trust him.

I don't either, Ash says in your mind, but it's not a thought-voice, it's her voice, clear and light with a little air in it, and you're hearing it, but this man doesn't, this man who looks at everything like he's recording it with his eyes, eyes that come back to you and don't smile right when he says, "Not much like Regency dance, is it? But you haven't been into that, lately."

"I think it's about time you start explaining why you're on my land, mister."

"I'm a friend of a friend," the man says.

He's lying, Ash says.

"Good to hear. Our mutual friend should introduce us," you say.

"I would give a lot for that to be possible."

He's lying, he's lying, Em, he's full of it I don't know him I never did.

I know, you think, and you shake your head. "I didn't see you at the ceremony."

"I don't think you were looking around much. You were in the inner circle. You were wearing Ash's lace stole, the one her cousin knitted for her for Christmas two years ago. Though Ash would have called it Yule, or Sol Invictus. And you would have, too, at one point."

How does he know that? How--

Aunt Irene, you and Ash say in unison. Ash giggles. You always did that--say the same thing at the same time.

"I didn't know her well," the man goes on. "Not like you. You went to school together? Ten years ago?"

"Thirteen," you say.

"Fast friends," he says. "You did everything together, the Regency dances, the spirit gatherings--but you quit. Four years ago, wasn't it?"

How does he know this I don't know him Em I don't what does he want? Get him out of here he just wants to hurt you

"What paper did you say you worked for, again?" and the way his face flattens

out you know you hit it.

"I didn't," he says, but that smile's shiny plastic. You don't believe it.

"Get off my land," you say, and you go into the house, lawn half done, and you snap the lock behind you. You want Ash to soothe you, but she doesn't say anything.

Ash?

Then it slides over you. You can't feel her.

There's a feeling, like someone is right behind you. You know the feeling. You have it when Ash is there, a soft body-heat warmth and the feeling when you try to force two magnets together, the feeling between your hands when you do Tai Chi, the same feeling you put into spells when you believed in them...

Fourteen minutes of her there, eight spent denying it, and now she's gone and it's like a hole ripped open all over again. She's gone and that... man asking questions, that's why and you hate him suddenly, hate him with a rage and pain you couldn't feel for the other driver, dead, too, dead to her steering wheel just not working and the panic rising up as she shoved the brake down to the floor, never thinking about the drivers behind her...

Stop. Focus...you can't. You're shaking and dizzy when you go into the kitchen--the heat, the stress, some juice will help--and the carton of orange juice is gone in a few swallows, it seems, and you've got an apple in your mouth while you go rooting around for more.

You can't feel her. You can't feel her. She's supposed to be there, but she's gone and the spot just where you feel warmth from her is cool and empty and you're going to faint if you don't keep eating, the juice wasn't enough, the apple wasn't enough. You drop a scoop of protein powder in a shaker and top it with milk. It's supposed to be a meal replacement but it's not enough, not from the odd tingling in your hands and ears.

There's a mini microwave lasagna. You poke the film with shaking hands and wait for the microwave to beep with your head between your knees. You're halfway through the third, well enough to sit up and eat slowly, washing down pasta, tomato sauce, and ground beef with long swallows of protein powder and milk when you catch a whiff of honey and sandalwood.

It's all right, Ash says. *You're safe. He won't ever come back.*

She's back.

It's all right now.

You don't look at the other two containers while you finish the third.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., May 5, 2014

Daniel Brady pops into Hafidha's office on the first Monday of May with an invitation to have two dozen red velvet cupcakes to go with Chaz's coffee.

She leads the way into the kitchen and plucks up a cupcake, peels the paper liner down, and eats it while pouring a milky coffee. "Chaz better get 'em while they're hot, all I'm saying."

"Where's Chaz?"

"Up the hall, helping with a geographic profile. They think they've got a serial abductor but no pattern, but Doc is a bright girl and thought they'd better check with Chazzie and make sure." Her eyes flick up, a bit left of center. "Yeah, he found something interesting, at least."

The cupcake's gone in a blink, paper wrapper tossed out with a napkin. Brady's barely gotten two bites. "Oh, yeah? Our kind of thing?"

"Doesn't seem so, no fnords, but that just means if there is a gamma they're not messing around with computers."

"Well, that's a relief."

Brady refills his coffee. "I know Nikki wasn't going to be in today anyway. Where's Mom?"

"Meeting."

"Do we even have the Gulfstream?"

"That's a good question. I can check for you. Just give me a second with these patient records."

Hafidha walks out of the kitchen with a little plate bearing a cupcake on top of her coffee mug. Brady stares after her. She's cheerful. Complimentary. No claws in a word she said.

She's allowed to have a good day, Brady tells himself, and he takes a cupcake along with him to the bullpen.

*

Sol Todd strolls in at about eleven. "Oh good, you're all still here."

"No case for us. I'm not even sure we have the plane," Brady says. "Hafidha said she'd tell me after she was done looking through patient..."

Solomon watches half amused as Brady slows down and swivels his head toward Hafidha's office. "Something wrong?"

"One second."

Brady gets up and sticks his head in Hafidha's office, and Sol follows. Hafidha stares at her monitors and a tablet, each of them scrolling forms. Sol catches the word "Inova" on the tablet and huffs a bit.

"Hafidha, are you hacking a hospital?"

"Only a little bit." The tablet switches to a home screen, but the other monitors keep scrolling. "I have a hunch."

"What's the hunch about?" Todd asks.

Her right shoulder goes up, a shield. "Motor-vehicle accidents."

"You have a hunch about motor-vehicle accidents, because..."

"I'm looking for a connection, if there is one, between motor-vehicle accidents in a radius around D.C. But I'm not Chaz, and there are no fnords. But still."

Brady nods, half to himself. If he had a glass of water Sol imagines that he would take a sip, just to give him a bit more time to think, but he forges ahead. "Hafs, I know I don't have to tell you--"

Hafidha puts up one long hand. "That Erik died from being smacked by a car? You don't have to tell me. That Daphne got mowed down by a semi? You don't have to tell me. That the actual details of the accidents were different and there wasn't a James Vijay Singh around to cause a stroke or aneurysm in the driver who killed Erik? You don't have to tell me that, either. That I'm probably obsessing over this because the Bug loves it? Loud and clear, baby. But I have a hunch."

"Okay," Brady says. "You want to talk about it?"

"No," Hafs snaps, and then leans back and kneads her forehead. "But I ought to. And I've been jamming all morning. I should eat something that isn't cupcakes. Cheeseburgers and pie?"

"Cheeseburgers and two pies."

"Okay, but what will you eat?"

"I'll think of something. Do you want anyone else with us?"

"No--ahh, Arthur. I'm feeling gentle today. Let's bring the new kid."

"I'm still the new kid?" This from Arthur Tan, who leans against the doorjamb, one foot in and one foot out.

"Until someone supplants you, New Kid. Cheeseburgers and pie?"

"Cheeseburgers and two pies."

"You know how it feels to go where everybody knows your name?" Hafs says. "Well, here I am. And I need you to tell me if I'm going crazy over this."

"I-- Sure," Arthur says. "Why me?"

"You're a comics nerd, and this is totally your-power-is-your-undoing stuff," Hafidha answers. She stands up, tablet disappearing into an eggplant-colored satchel. "Also, lunch with handsome scenery? Bonus."

Arthur backs up and lets the parade file past him to the hall. "Were we just objectified?"

"Damn straight we were," Brady says.

"Report me to HR?"

"Eh...Naaah," Arthur-as-Bugs-Bunny says, and Hafidha giggles as she pushes the elevator button.

Todd catches Arthur's eye and winks.

"Somebody ought to make a Gettysburger, you know that?"

Todd feels the chuckle, swallows it. Deadpans, "Hafs. *Scandal*?"

"Twitter exploded every Thursday night," Hafs says, making the lace hem of her skirt bloom with a turn in the elevator. "Damn if I didn't get sucked in, too. I'm *still* mad about James Novak."

"Okay, so this research. How long have you been doing it?"

Arthur sticks his hand out to hold the elevator doors open. "Research?"

"Just started this morning. Anyway. My parents were in this weekend. Gone on Tuesday after we had my birthday lunch. They were here to go to a meeting over at Arkham."

Sol knows Hafidha's parents were in town, but Hafidha usually keeps a wall between her and the survivors's meetings. The elevator doors open and admit a pair of agents, and they all shift to let them in, conversation halted until Sol asks, "Where to?"

"You said burgers? Ollie's," Arthur volunteers.

Hafidha purses her mouth sideways. "The Styrofoam plates get me down."

"Elephant and Castle," Brady says.

Hafidha considers as the doors open onto the lobby, then nods. "I can live with it. Don't think they have pie, though."

"There will be cake," Sol says. "Chocolate cake."

They settle into a flying wedge, Hafs breaking the floes of traffic. "We had a nice weekend, but yeah, my parents witnessed a car accident."

"Oh, that's not good," Arthur says. What kind?"

"Single car. They were driving with the top down and he passed them at top speed screaming no, no, no, and then he went right off the road and plowed into a stone wall. Freaky, right?"

"Freaky," Brady agrees. "Our-kind-of-thing freaky, though?"

"Your spidey senses tingled," Todd says.

"Yes. Erik died because of a freak accident," Hafidha says, and Sol watches Brady suppress the urge to look directly at her or react in any way. "The car's airbags spontaneously deployed, knocking the driver unconscious, and the car hit Erik at a crosswalk."

"That's also terrible. Hafidha, I am so sorry," Arthur says.

"Me, too, Arthur," Hafidha says. "Thanks. But enough sharing and caring for a minute."

They plow straight through crowds on the street, past signs advertising specials for lunch.

"Okay, where was I?" Hafidha says. "Right. Car accidents and connections. I wondered what actually killed the guy, and my spidey senses did indeed tingle. I've been looking into hospital records about car crashes with fatalities all morning--"

"Just to make sure?" Arthur asks.

"Because I can't not think of purple elephants. Now that I'm thinking about it I can't stop," Hafidha says. "And I don't know why but I thought if I could find this one victim...I don't know. I've got nothing but a hunch, and ... all the other stuff. That makes me worry that I'm seeing the monster that isn't there."

"I'm glad you told me," Brady says.

Arthur Tan nods. "And me."

"Vulnerability still sucks, though," Hafidha mutters. "I keep thinking I've seen it all, why should this scare me?"

Todd puts a hand on her elbow. Her failure to flinch puts a twinge of warmth

in him. "You've never seen everything," he says.

She kicks him lightly on the shin.

*

Hafidha orders double pub pretzels before they even sit down. Brady waits while she, Todd, and Tan choose their seats. He takes the one remaining, on Hafidha's right so their eating hands don't cross up elbows. He remembers when they used to stick Reyes and Hafs on the same side of the table, so the lefties could coordinate. The more things change, the more they keep on changing.

The waitress looks at them oddly when they each ask for a starter dish *and* menus.

Hafidha demolishes a pretzel and shares the basket around before resuming. "So, tax records--"

"Because you're hacking the IRS, must be Friday," Arthur says, and Hafidha snakes one hand out to steal one of his regular potato skins.

"Tax records show," Hafidha continues, "that Matthew Sheehy was a reporter who sorta kinda got laid off from the *Loudoun Times-Mirror,* but was still making money from them and a few other papers by writing puff pieces, usually about local businesses in the county and personalities. On speculation. Times are tough for everybody."

"The death was ruled an accident," Brady says. Gently.

Todd breaks off a bite of pretzel, dips it in grainy mustard, and stuffs it into his open mouth. He's obviously much too busy chewing to say a damned word, and Brady is grateful.

She swallows and says, "Yes. It was. Single car. Lost control. But the post-mortem examination says cardiac arrest."

That wasn't a congruent cause of death for a car accident, was it? *Daphne would know.* Brady shoves the thought down. "Okay, I'm waiting for it."

"No heart disease, clean tox screen, no embolism, and he was twenty-six years old." Hafidha has a bite of stuffed Yorkshire pudding and looks at Brady.

"Died of fright, is what you're guessing. On one death."

"Well, I can assume he was afraid, from what my folks saw on their way back up from Idlewood."

"We can't follow it up officially," Arthur says.

"And it doesn't fit Erik's accident, if cardiac arrest was the cause of the

accident," Brady says.

"One sparrow doesn't make a summer. It doesn't fit with Erik's accident, but it's still weird and I'm looking for more. That's why I'm hacking hospitals."

"Any more unusual cardiac arrests?" Brady offers a coconut shrimp, and Hafidha accepts.

"Nope."

Sol Todd tears off another section of pretzel. "Well, they could be usual-appearing cardiac arrests, natural deaths..."

"People go to the emergency room for anxiety attacks," Arthur says.

"You're buying in?" Hafs asks.

"I'm being helpful," Arthur replies. "Though technically you don't have a warrant for any of this and there's no official notice or anything like that and shouldn't be doing it at all."

"Which is exactly why I'm not doing anything. Doing what? Okay, so admissions for emergency rooms that wound up being anxiety attacks. Should look for Xanax, Klonopin, my little buddy Ativan ... Oh." Hafidha blinks at the air. "There are hundreds. This could take a while. I should probably add it to the file."

"That isn't on the FBI servers."

Hafs gives Brady a look. "Of course it isn't. It's on the server at home."

"Have you looked into insurance claims and lawsuits?" Sol asks, and Hafidha shakes her head. "Freak mechanical failures would lead to lawsuits by the survivors. A lot of the stuff is on paper, though. You mind sharing what you've got with me?"

"That's an offer I can't refuse," Hafidha says. "I can send you the files, too, no problem."

"I'm not much help with research," Brady says. "But I can give opinions."

"Thanks, Danny. But more work later or else we'll need three pies. You gonna eat the rest of those, New Kid?"

*

Hafidha follows Todd into Esther's office, because it's never a bad idea to let Solomon Todd take point. Falkner quirks up an eyebrow, but she's smiling her welcome.

"There is no way I can even pay you consulting fees, Sol. What are you doing

here?"

"Hafidha had an idea. I'm helping her check it out," Sol says.

"There's cupcakes," Hafidha says.

"They're parve," Brady says.

"And I didn't eat meat for lunch, because I saw those cupcakes," Esther says. "How about we have our meeting over a few?"

"Arthur, will you get plates and forks? I'll make a fresh pot of coffee, since Chaz is..." Hafidha stares at the air. "Not going to be here for another fifteen minutes at least. Seems he figured out the hot zone for their UNSUB."

"Tell him to tell them to let him eat before he falls down," Esther says.

"He had a Clif Bar. But he knows there is cake. He says that gallon of milk in the fridge is to go with."

"Then let's put this off. Say ten minutes?"

"Ten's good," Hafidha nods, bringing her focus back into the room. "I'll go take care of that coffee."

"So, you can text us with your brain?" Arthur asks, following Hafidha into the kitchen.

"You kidding? I have to remember to play with the screen half the time."

"Yeah, if I could do that I'd probably do it without thinking," Arthur says. "And Hafidha? There's nothing wrong with following a hunch."

Hafidha looks over her shoulder at Arthur, the rest of her swiveling around to face him. "You *have* bought in."

"I think it's worth a look. Because you think it's worth a look," Arthur says. "And I'm not worried, because you aren't trying to keep it a secret. You keep secrets when your power is your undoing."

Arthur walks out with a stack of side plates. Hafida stares after him.

"Knew I wanted you along for a reason, New Kid."

*

"So I'm guessing that this is about what we talked about at lunch," Brady says, as they all assemble in the meeting room, "and not a case."

Falkner says, "Correct. We're still punching the clock, but the sequester is still squeezing the money. So if any of you have a reason to take a personal day, to make appointments or just to stay home or because you want a three-day

weekend for a change, wrestle over what days you want to take."

"I'll take tomorrow," Hafidha says, lifting her fork in the air. "I will of course be reachable but I can stay home and play a video game with ironic content."

"You're not talking about *Outlast,*" Arthur says and Hafidha nods.

"You betcha. I'm going to use it to monitor some tweaks I've made to my bugzapper."

"*Outlast* is ironic because?" Brady asks.

"You play an investigative reporter looking into shady business at a recently reopened insane asylum. Cue monsters everywhere, and now you have to escape."

"Seriously."

"Yep."

"Eat your cupcake."

Hafidha cackles and gets another.

"Did you save any for me?" Chaz slides into his seat. A pair of cupcakes and a tall glass of milk already wait there, and he peels down the paper on one while looking around.

"So it seems you're not going to need to take a personal day, Platypus," Hafidha says.

"Yeah, no. There are two possible hot zones. I think I know which one is the right one but Celentano wants two teams, so I'm headed to Austin. It's really short notice," Chaz says apologetically.

"You don't need to watch over me, I'm okay. I'll check in with you every few hours, and I can have company over--"

"Will you make me a pie?" Sol asks.

"I will make you two pies," Hafidha promises.

"But what will you eat?"

"Smart-ass."

*

Leesburg, VA

Costco looks about the same everywhere. You walk into a warehouse with the right card, and weave your way through the merchandise that tempts you

while you search for what you actually need. You used to duck into the vast cavern only to buy cleaning supplies and whatever would keep for months, consider the nicely discounted electronics, and make a promise to come back later when you had a little more money. Now you're glad you got the membership, because you're here to buy food. Nobody bats an eye at shopping carts full of food. You just have to lie and say "three" when someone asks how many kids you have. It's easy to just nod, smile, and get out.

Ashley's return eases your heart. It's hard to mourn her when she's the angel on your shoulder, ready to whisper in your ear. You wonder if it's real. You can't help it. But she's there, and she's not the only thing that is. The power surges in your hands, so strong you think hard about touching anything lest it arc from you. You can raise it with a thought, with an emotion. You have to be careful.

Work has cut down everyone's hours by one day a week. It's so no one has to be cut off, but you're barely making it now. You make the minimum payments on your credit cards and try not to think of how much peanut butter you could buy for that, or how much pasta, or toilet paper, for that matter. Another cut you can't afford won't help.

But you've never felt the need to eat so urgently in your life. You're no stranger to six-egg-white omelets and protein shakes from the days when you lifted heavy. You worry about that, about how much it costs mostly, but you worry about why you're so hungry and you think you know.

It's the power. The books got it right--expending magical energy is expending energy. So you buy pasta, oats, whole wheat berries, beans and lentils, coarse ground cornmeal in bulk, whey powder, eggs, chicken breasts, pork chops, rice. You buy cream sauces and gallons of apple juice, five pound bags of apples, two-pound blocks of cheese, and you hope it's going to be enough. You buy a stack of two-pound frozen pasta dishes intended for a family of four, and one of your cases of salad greens falls off your cart while you wait in line.

When you straighten up, there's a man standing in front of you. He's got a gallon jug of dishwashing soap and a gallon of milk, one in each hand.

You wonder who goes to Costco to buy two things. "Excuse me, but I'm in line and there's two people behind me."

"I'm just getting a couple of things, it's no problem," he says, and turns his back.

You can't believe it. "Excuse me--"

The man ignores you. He takes a telephone call, or pretends to, since he's got a headset in one ear. He's talking about buying houses. Many houses, not just

one. He calls them properties, says something about using the investment for a tax break.

You glare daggers into his back. The power rushes through you. You tell yourself you can't stop it, but honestly, you don't want to. Rich bastard. It builds until it bursts, and you feel coldness just behind you. Even silent, you feel Ash, but in the moments when the power releases she disappears.

The man glances left and right. Apologizes to the phone-- "I thought I heard something, what did you say?" --but he can't stop looking around. You watch his shoulders twitch, a shudder. "I'm sorry, something came up, I'll call you later."

Justice is yours. You push the power again, and he twists at the waist trying to catch sight of something, hugs the jug of milk to him, wipes his hand on his pants.

He doesn't even last a minute. He near-whimpers, "I've got to get out of here," sets down the jugs, and half runs to the exit. The security guard tries to intercept him, but the man cries, "I've got to get out of here!" and shoves him aside in his haste to get out.

A screech of tires and a blaring horn follow his exit. People crane their necks as if they could see through the walls.

You fight the urges to grin and to faint at the same time.

*

Arlington, VA

Hafidha and Chaz's condo smells like fresh baked bread and it obeys Hafidha's every gesture. She snaps her fingers and the lights come on, the burglar alarm accepts her code when she points at it. A voice murmurs, "You have no messages," as Hafidha wiggles her nose at an enormous flat-screen TV. It scrolls quickly through menus and Tom Petty plays through the home theater.

Sol puts his elbows on the butcher-block table and sighs contently.

"We've got beer. Your iPad's connected... and there's the file server. Unless you want a laptop, on the shelf there."

"Beer's good. What do you need me to chop?"

"Apples," Hafidha says. "I meant it about the pies. Chaz pulled out frozen leftover stew for dinner today."

He waves at the table in front of himself. "Put the knife and fruit there. How much stew do the two of you have to make to have leftovers?"

"Twelve quarts."

"Wow. Talk about your hunch?"

"Sure." Hafidha opens drawers, puts out bowls, finds a bag of apples in a cupboard. "Like I said, the car accident caught my eye. It got me thinking--about Erik."

"But it made you wonder."

"Well it's not a usual thing, is it? Yelling in terror and driving into a tree? There had to be a reason. So I thought, I'll find out what it was, lay this to rest. Only I got--"

"More questions," Sol says, peeling an apple in one long loop.

"More questions," Hafidha agrees. "And the bugzapper only trips when I start worrying that it's the Bug making me fix on this." A heavy pot goes on the stove, and Hafs spoons two containers of thick beef stew into it. The dishes land in the left-hand sink on her way to the fridge.

"Does it work better, or worse, knowing that it's zapping your responses?"

"Mine works great. I've had a lot of time to monitor it. I probably have a scientific paper about my 1.52 revision."

"You gonna write it?"

"Kat--Doctor Allison can do it."

"How much better do you feel?"

"It hasn't un-monstered me. But I trust myself some of the time. I trust Chaz more, of course. And he thinks I can be on my own. So I do not fuck it up, because he trusts me. Neat trick, yeah?"

"Neat trick," Sol agrees. "You want to hear what I'm thinking about with your motor-vehicle accidents?"

"Yeah. First, my guess. We've got a gremlin."

"That's what I was thinking. Someone with the ability to make machines malfunction. That or a witch."

"Throwing hexes?" They both pause for a moment, remembering New Mexico. And Daphne.

"Land of Enchantment," Sol says. Apple wedges splash in acidulated water. Then: "Hexes is vague, and we don't yet have a pattern to put a gremlin on."

"Maybe there's two," Hafida says, rocking the pastry blade though lard and

butter and flour. "Because I'm just a barrel of sunshine."

"If we find two patterns, then maybe we'll have two gammas. How do you want to organize this?"

"Do it any way you want to. I can literally pick the data out of the air. Can you make me a cup of ice water, and get me the vodka from the freezer?"

"I can," Sol says, and rises to get both things. "For the piecrust?"

"For the piecrust," Hafidha agrees. "I'm thinking about the panic attacks. Can we eliminate the repeat customers for panic attacks?"

"Probably, but let's just tag repeats and then see if there's nothing. A witch could hex someone they know personally many times. I've got another tag, for the accidents," Sol says, and cores another peeled apple after cutting it in half. "Can you check to see if any of the vehicles were under a recall, and match any of the mechanical failures not just by type of failure but the same car models and years?"

"So say, 2008 MINI Cooper S, circuit board fire?"

"You didn't make that up."

Hafidha grins her wide grin. "I certainly did not. Fresh off recall.gov."

"You're an oracle, Hafs. I would keep you in my pocket."

"You do. I'm on your phone."

*

Some time later, Hafiha serves them both wedges of apple pie and Sol nods in satisfaction at the balance of sweetness and spices. He put his fork down to linger over the first bite, and Hafidha nods. That's as it should be. And it's as good a time as any to admit that she needs help.

"Actually I wonder if I could ask you to do this unpaid labor," Hafidha asks, and then washes down the bit of pie with some of her pint glass of milk. "I can rob seven hundred banks, bounce the money around the world and buy you stock certificates, if you're low on cash. But that would be a bit like bringing you a dead vole, so maybe I should just shut up and ask."

"Pay me in pie, Hafidha. This is fantastic. Really, what would you like?"

"When I told you all that I was looking into, you came up with better ideas than me," Hafidha says. *Can't get right to it, gotta talk around it.* "I didn't think of the panic attack thing, and the lawsuit claims compared against recorded parts recalls, that's all really good. I think I'm too close to it. I had a hunch, but it's about Erik. I want to find who's responsible. I never stopped

thinking that."

"And now you posit accidents involving weird malfunctions."

"Yes. Well, no. That's what I found, and I'm trying to connect them together."

"But the accident your parents witnessed didn't have a weird malfunction."

"In the car, there was no weird malfunction. But there was in the body."

"You can't connect the two, you know that."

"But I can't shake the idea that I'm looking at a single point on two different graphs. And I will obsess, and I will keep looking... Sol, I *can't* do this alone. But if you can carry it..."

Sol gently sets his fork down. "That's a lot of trust, Hafs."

"I know you won't just soothe me down and not look. Besides. If I'm right? You want to know, too." Hafidha watches Sol's slow, single nod. "I might be faster at finding a needle in a big pile of needles, but you're better at figuring out which needle used to be in Drama Club in middle school with the other needle I found, and how it makes a story. I'll be your pocket oracle, you be the maestro."

Hafidha can't help the smile she gets when Sol nods. "Can you put everything we have on a server I can access?"

"It's on your iPad. You want it at home, too?"

"The machine's powered off."

"Turn it on when you get home and text me," Hafs says. "You sure you don't want those stock certificates?"

"Scrounging around your place for food and pie is fine." He pauses, pensive. "Hafs, Stephen and I have been working on something that maybe it's time you knew about."

"The thing that eats T. rexes?" she asks.

"Yes. And." The crust is flaky and perfect, but Hafidha watches Sol pick at it nonetheless. "Stephen thinks there's a pattern. One that includes Hope Mitchell and Guy Nadon and Jeffrey Simmons."

"Quantico," she says, eyes closing. "Viv Paliotto?"

"Erik Holt is on his list as well."

She nods, a puppet movement. Deliberate. Artificial. "I'm not the only conspiracy theorist in the house."

"We had reasons not to mention it."

"They were good reasons," she says. "Chaz knows?"

"He's the pattern master," Sol admits. "You're not angry?"

"You give me everything I can handle, Duke. You trust me more than I do. What's to be angry about?" Deliberately, she cuts more pie. Takes a bite, swallows. "Someone's gunning for us. And has been for a long time."

"Evidence suggests," he says gently.

She stands. "Well. I want coffee. How about you?"

"I'll be up all night," he answers, but it's not a no.

*

Arlington, VA, May 7, 2014

The phone rings just after midnight. Hafida puts the phone on speaker and hooks a finger under her bead bracelet. "Platypus?"

"I'm coming home, Wabbit. We found our UNSUB." Chaz's tired voice sounds through measured breaths.

"You sound like that's not a win. Did the arrest go down messy?"

"We found Chad Wendell Holmes in his apartment. Strangled."

Hafidha shrugs into a cashmere cardigan, and stuffs her feet into slippers. "Strangled."

"We got there too late. I can't order the body up so Frost can examine it, but there was no reason to believe he was a gamma."

"What even the hell, Platypus. This is the worst Moriarty ever. And you didn't get to see any music, did you."

"I am so mad, Wabbit."

"I am, too." *Check out the empathy,* Hafs thinks. But it's always easy to care about Chaz. "He did it as a taunt. And that'll be the hubris that means we get him. All the reports done?"

"Some of them."

Hafidha opens the fridge and pours herself a glass of milk. "Yoink."

"Wabbit..."

He wasn't actually alarmed, Hafs knew. Just habit."Just don't tell anybody. I'm giving them to Sol."

"Why Sol?"

"Because we have to update you on our acts of private citizenship."

"Wabbit..."

"Sol's looking out for me. And I watered the plants. And I didn't want to hurt them very much."

"And we're on a phone," he sighs, defeated.

"Sol told me about the conspiracy," she says, a rush.

There's a pause. Then: "Good," Chaz answers. "Frankly, I think we can use all hands."

"Are you here or there? I've got half a pie that needs eating."

"I'm here," Chaz says. "I'll be home soon. Do we need milk?"

"We always need milk."

*

Ashton, VA, May 14, 2014

This time the boxes Dice balances on his left hand are donuts -- brown butter, dulce de leche, orange chocolate, and cannoli from a place on Capitol Hill. Leon takes a cannoli right away and passes the box on to his partner--"Try that kind before I eat them all"--and Dice makes his way up to the unit. Eddie waits for him in the hallway, chessboard and bag tucked under his arm. He's wearing faded jeans with a plaid shirt.

"Regular clothes," Dice says. "Walks yet?"

"Not yet," Eddie says, and something's wrong. He isn't smiling, isn't really interested in the baked goods or his nicotine gum. "Lets play, come on."

Eddie chooses a table that's off to the side, the dim corner by the piano no one plays, not his sunny window in earshot of the TV.

"Something wrong?" Dice asks.

"Natalie got mad at me," he says.

"Oh shit, sorry to hear. Is she still mad at you?"

"She's in observation," Eddie says. "I didn't know, I was just trying to help."

He sets the board up, gives Dice white. He looks down at the pieces with stubborn focus.

"What were you trying to help with?"

"You said you wouldn't use her, so I figured I'd try and get the ball rolling. I told her you liked her."

"Christ in a bucket."

"She got upset. Threw a table at me and then I--" He stops talking.

Dice opens with King's pawn four and Eddie mirrors it. "You didn't fight back."

"No, hell no, I knew I fucked up the second my brain caught up with my mouth," Eddie says, and accepts the King's Gambit.

"You shouldn't have said that to her. Natalie really doesn't need anyone romantically interested in her, and now she's probably not sure she can trust me to really be her friend."

"How do you even do that? Be friends with a girl. What do you even talk about?"

"Natalie's a scientist," Dice says quietly. "She likes to talk about chemistry and biology. She's very interested in the brain."

"Really? But she's... well, she's pretty."

"She's pretty, and she's a scientist," Dice says, and waits for the dismissal.

Instead Eddie settles down to play an open game, and the next thing Dice knows, he can't castle.

"Shit."

"Play it through and then I'll show you what I did," Eddie says. He remembers the games they play, never becomes more animated than when he explains a tactical choice, and Dice listens, remembers maybe half of it.

"I will never be good at this game," Dice says.

"You're better already," Eddie says. "It's just that I am now *really* good at this game. I've had a lot of time to learn it. I got books and stuff. And you're learning."

"Slowly."

"Nah. You get to play me for like half an hour a week, is all. We've done this what, twice? Last time was--shit, I was still in school. You got your own things you're into. Always have."

Maybe this is it, Dice thinks.

"I have to tell you," Eddie says, and he's staring hard at the chess game

between them. "When Natalie threw that table at me, I--"

When Eddie falters, Dice just waits.

"I used to think you were too stupid to learn, you know? When we were kids. You wouldn't learn better. You never would. And I thought I was better off because I was the good brother. And you know what I figured out? That's what put me in here. I'm here and you're not. Because you wouldn't learn."

"Eddie..."

"No. Let me finish. I learned. I learned about evil and sluts and faggots and illegals. I figured it out. You don't think like me. So ... I started trying to be like you. I got the treatment. I played along in therapy. I thought I was doing better."

"You are, Eddie."

"No. No, I'm not. Look at the board."

Dice glances down at the forgotten chessboard.

Black King's Bishop moves. Slowly, wobbling on its felt feet, the resin piece slides across black squares barely an inch to rest in front of the black king, and halts.

"J'adoube," Eddie laughs, low but fearful. "I can't pick anything up with it. Just--push, or hit things. But it's strong."

"How long?"

"I used it to block the table. Week ago? Ten days?"

"You haven't told anyone."

"They'll put me back."

"Let's tell Dr. Ramachandran, okay? We can figure this out."

"I don't want to hurt anybody," Eddie said.

"I know, Eddie. Everyone knows. Come on, we'll talk to the doctor."

He's going to be late for bike polo. But Eddie needs him, and his little brother shuffles along behind Dice as Dice leads the way out to the nurses' station.

*

Ashton, VA, May 15, 2014

You're on supermax gateway duty and your stomach is already grumbling after lunch, and you had at least a pound of pizza with a quart of milk. You

took the earliest lunch, made like you were buying four slices on pizza day for coworkers, and tore through them like a starving jackal before anyone could come in and see you.

It's an hour to your next break, and the green light indicating movement in the hallway is on. Someone's coming. If it's someone who knew you had lunch, then eating cheese, crackers, and an apple won't fly. Eating too much here would flip everyone out, and explaining about magic? You can't do it.

You watch the doors. It's what you're supposed to do. You breathe a sigh of relief when the stocky figure of Rupert Beale resolves into sight.

He's favoring his leg a bit today. You want to say something sympathetic and you know he'd hate it, so you just say, "Hi."

"How's the fort?" Beale asks, and produces a little clear clamshell with a cheese Danish. "Do me a favor? I bought it on impulse."

"The fort's all right," you say, and accept the Danish. "I'll just run an extra fifteen and make up for it."

"No trouble, with being short staffed?"

"Not so far. Everybody knows the routines, and everybody's been quiet. Well. There was an altercation up on four. That was exciting."

"The supervised wing?"

"Yeah. Maybe letting them have their own gen pop isn't so hot. But I'm not the Doctors, am I?"

"They do what they can to make sure the patients on the new program can handle the responsibility."

"Until they start chucking tables at each other," you grumble. The Danish glistens. You can smell the butter that went into its making, the slight creamy-sour tang of the cheese. You *want* that Danish.

"Tossing tables could be the worst of it," Dr. Beale says. "We still have hope that the stress of the outside world can be handled by the implant surgery."

You once told Beale how much letting that woman Hafidha walk free bothers you. It's wrong. She'll go wrong. Even in a cage she acted like a queen on a throne. She'd sit down and expect the river to move. When you told Beale what you really thought, he didn't disagree. That nice girl Susanna tried it, and she came right back here.

"Anyway, you came to see somebody. Patient?"

"I did. Donatta Fletcher. She's next for the implant."

"How are they even going to-- You can't even *touch* her."

"Not with your hand," he says. He looks right in your eyes. "But you can touch her with a scalpel."

"Wow," you say, and think about it. "That's fucking brutal. You ever feel like they're moving too fast with that thing?"

"Not that I would admit out loud," Rupert Beale said. "I'll let you get to that Danish."

Act III

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2014

"This is bat country," Hafidha's phone reports.

"Sol," Hafidha says. "How goes the battle?"

"I found something," Sol says.

"What did you find?" Hafidha asks the air. She lifts a hand, and all the monitors halt in their scrolling and streaming, waiting for her smallest gesture.

"Starbucks."

"Um, Sol? The word 'ubiquitous.' Feeling any association?"

"I looked at the three gremlin cases we found. Two of the three happened within five hundred feet of a Starbucks."

"The third?"

"On a highway with a direct feeder road with a Starbucks on it. Genevieve Howard, the steering failure accident in September, had purchased a decaf nonfat sugar-free caramel machiatto--"

"What is even the point. I'm so confused right now."

Sol makes a small chuff of amusement. "Well, that was what was in her stomach contents."

"So there could be a chance that I'll find the same credit card information at all three locations on the respective days of their accidents?"

"You might," Sol says. "I'll hold."

"Could take a minute to do this all private citizenry... No. But that doesn't mean that there wasn't someone there, using different payment methods on one or more visits."

"Or cash," Sol says. "I'll keep looking."

*

Purcellville, VA, May 20, 2014

Connor just shows up at your door--on a Tuesday night, after nine. He's wearing the lawn shirt that Ash made for him, with full sleeves and a high collar, meant to be fastened with a stock.

"At quadrille club?" you ask.

He smiles. "We're not supposed to talk about it."

That ritual done, you open the door and let him in. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I thought if I called to ask to see you, you'd make an excuse," Connor said.

"I would have."

He looks so much like Ash. The same brown hair, prone to light auburn in the sunlight. The same narrow nose, the tip up-tilted. The same gold-dusted eyes. He looks at you, reaches to touch your shoulder.

You remember to hold still.

"I know you would have," he says. "I've been worried. I haven't heard from you, Mom hasn't, she worries, too. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"I don't actually believe you," Connor says. Ash should be chiding you to relax, but she's just as still as you, just as cold.

"Okay," you say. "I wish she weren't dead. But--"

"But?"

"It feels like she's still here."

"Oh, Em," Connor says, and you're flush up against him, his arms around you. A hug. He's hugging you.

You remember what to do. You raise your arms, close them around Connor's back. A hug. Connor's shoulders slump a bit as he relaxes, still holding on.

"I still feel her," you say. "That makes it all right."

"Em. She loved you. Mom loves you. I love you."

You know what you should say. "I know. I love you, too."

"Em," Connor says, and pulls back. Looks at you. "I love you."

"I know," you say, and something in his face changes, smooths out as his eyes close. You try to think of what to say.

But he's kissing you and everything in you screams *no no* and you push him away. Connor leans against your hands, saying, "It's okay, it's all right," and he just slips between your hands and kisses you again.

Make him stop! Ash cries. *It's not right it's not right*

"No," you say. "Stop. It's not all right. I don't like it."

And Connor leans back, looks at you, steps back. Wipes his mouth. "I'm sorry, Em. I didn't want to scare you."

"I know," you say. Ash is still screaming.

"It's just, we've known each other a long time, since I was a kid. And I never said anything but you had to know."

"I knew. I didn't want you to do that."

"Why, Em? You changed. You quit dancing, and you quit Wicca--"

"I didn't believe in it anymore." But now you have power. So much power, bursting to get out with Ash's screams.

"Ash told me that you and her weren't a thing."

"We weren't." But she was the only one who you could bear touching you. The only one. "Hold on, will you?"

You walk out to your yard, and the breeze that curls around you is cool, welcoming. You fall to your knees and the bruised grass releases its scent under your weight. You press against the ground and beg the power to go into the earth, away from Connor, beg Ash to stop screaming.

She didn't know what happened to you when she was alive, but she knows it now. She's the one reliving it, not you. She's the one with her face turned away, with her eyes shut tight, with broken nails stuck in her palms. *Please Ash, it's over,* you say. *Wipe it away. We're here in Purcellville, in the house my grampa built and we're safe. Please, we're safe.*

You vomit onto the grass, but it's nothing but yellow bile. The world spins hard enough to throw you off, but you rise against it and stagger back up the porch, where Connor stands and stares in horror.

"Excuse me," you say, and lurch up the porch steps.

"I'm sorry," Connor says. "Can I come inside?"

"Yes. Help me."

*

It's Connor who brings you a cup of water and plain saltines. You nibble them, but you need more, and blackness is creeping in on the edges of your vision.

"What happened to you?" Connor asks.

"Feel faint. Haven't eaten enough," you say.

"I'll make you something. Just tell me what to do."

"Get the blender."

You talk him through adding a banana, protein powder, coconut milk, pineapple, and chia seeds to mix into a thick liquid. He finds the homemade energy bars in the fridge and brings you the tub. It's enough. You'll be able to get up and cook your own omelette in a minute.

"Are you going to be okay?" Connor says.

"Yeah, my blood sugar is gonna be just fine in a minute."

"That's good. I meant, are you going to be okay?"

"Sure," you say.

"Something happened to you," Connor said. "I should have seen it before. You changed so much."

"Connor."

"It's okay," Connor said. "But you pushed everybody away. Everybody but Ash, and she fought to stay near you. But Ash is gone, and you're alone here."

"I'm all right."

"I don't really believe you," Connor says. "But okay."

"You had better go," you say. "I have to work in the morning."

"Okay, no more pushing. I'll call you," he says. "Someone needs to check up on you."

You watch him until he drives out of sight. Then you take your phone out of your pocket and block his phone number from your contact list.

You can't ever see him again.

*

Ashton, VA, May 21, 2014

Dice has strudel this time--apple and poppyseed, and Hafidha Gates swoops in just in time to get one of the poppyseeds. Dice proffers the box to Daniel Brady, who puts his hand up and says, "Can't, but thanks."

"Tank," Dice says. "Did you two come together? Is everything--"

"Everything's fine, Lucky," Hafs says. "I'm here to see the doc, Brady's going to interview a subject. How is your brother?"

"I think he's doing good. He's upstairs now."

"Bugzapper's okay, then." Hafidha looks up as the air shifts with the front door, and if Dice hadn't been looking he wouldn't have seen the impassiveness sweep over her face.

Hafidha takes another bite of her strudel. Dice turns to see who it is.

"Dr. Beale," Dice says.

"Rupert, please," Dr. Beale says, and lets go of his wheeled brief box to shake hands, the other wrapped around an extra-large frappuccino something.

"Strudel while we wait?" Dice offers, and Dr. Beale takes apple, toes his brief box down by the bench.

"Thank you. I was meaning to ask you--" He pauses as Hafidha's service pistol thunks into a plastic tub.

"We're butting in, Lucky. You set off the metal detector."

"I do," Dice says. "Go ahead."

"Catch you later. Thanks for the strudel," Hafidha calls over her shoulder, walking away with high-heeled clicks. Brady follows soon after.

"You were meaning to ask me, sorry?"

"If you'd do an interview. It would be anonymized, of course, but I'd like your insight," Dr. Beale says.

"Uh, okay. If it'll be useful. When did you want to do it?"

"Wednesdays and Sundays are your usual days off?"

"Yeah. I've got bike polo on Wednesday nights, but after the next Sunday meeting?"

"We'll come up with a good time, then."

Dice meant literally after the meeting, but Dr. Beale was already putting his wallet and watch and things in the tub. He lifts that frappucino cup in salute and thanks Dice for the strudel, headed to the upstairs.

Dice sets the metal detectors off, and lets Leon escort him in the room to do the usual search.

*

Daniel Brady would like to eat a strudel, but he doesn't want it churning around in his stomach while he meets with Jason Saito. Saito will insinuate, and probe, trying to scare him, and Saito's favorite weapon walked next to him, heading for the elevator.

Maybe he could dull that blade. "Donatta had her surgery today?" Brady asks.

"She sure did," Hafs says. "I've got a full plate of visits this afternoon. Donatta, Suze, and Dr. Allison. The doc wants to know how I changed my bugzapper, so I'm going to change one for her."

Hafs put her finger right on the sorest spot. Danny tries to answer like her tinkering doesn't worry him."Will your revision suit everyone?"

"That's what we're wondering. It would be nice if I could stop Donatta's nightmares--she has dreams about the caverns and the river. Along with the rest of it, but it's the river that really gets her."

"I've been in that river. Can't say I blame her for that." Hafidha's boots thud on the vinyl floor as they walk down the hallway to the elevator that waits in the center of all the patient wings. Brady holds a fire door open for her.

Hafida nods and walks through, pressing the down arrow for the elevator. "You can't stop all nightmares, though. It sounds like it would be nice, but I think we need fear." She shifts to stand on one foot, messing with the buckle on the ankle of her boot.

Brady sticks his arm out for Hafs to grab, just in case. "That's philosophical."

"No," Hafida says. she takes Brady's arm, though, and fixes whatever's wrong with the buckle. "That's Bugzapper build 1.21a. Not a good day."

Brady knows that he better not ask. "It was only a day, though."

"Ask Chaz about it sometime," Hafs says. "I'm not sure I'm ready to look back on it and laugh just yet."

"I've got a day from tenth grade like that."

"Subject change time, Brady. You know that side project Sol and I are working on?"

"Yes. You have news?"

She glances over her shoulder at the security guard and drops her voice. "Just an update. Apparently Matthew Sheehy was writing a piece about green

burials, but asked for a little more time because he'd stumbled onto something involving one of the people who turned up as recently buried. Her name was Ashley Campbell."

*

You freeze. *Don't look up don't look up*

"--Her name was Ashley Campbell. And guess what."

You know that voice. You can't stop your chin from rising. You look across the counter of your security desk and at the speaker. It's the one who didn't come back. Hafidha. The one with the bright yarn and the sharp words. The one who could make computers dance to her will.

"Did she die in a car accident?"

You know him, too. He's one of the FBI team who finds the monsters and brings them here. He's chatting with Hafidha about Ash, about Ashley's death.

Why are they talking about me?

"On the highway where Matthew Sheehy died. Sounds like that thing we don't believe in, right? But wait, there's more."

"Ashley Campbell died because of a spontaneous airbag deployment?"

"No. She died because the driver in front of her had a sudden steering failure, panicked, and slammed on the brakes. Solomon Todd found the lawsuit and the insurance claim."

You wonder who they're talking about. Who was Matthew Sheehy? You pick up a clipboard and move out from behind the desk. You follow them to hear more.

"So you think it's connected. Ashley Campbell dies on that road, and then Matt smells a story and starts investigating--what?"

They know! Ash cries, and your insides clutch. The reporter. He's dead? But you keep walking. Guards and orderlies and nurses are invisible. Just doing their jobs.

"I don't know yet," Hafidha says. "His personal effects were returned to his family. There wasn't anything in his email or his cloud. I think he used *paper.*" She's exasperated.

But then she looks at you, that sharp sidewise look. "Partridge," she says. "How can I help?"

"I just wanted to double-check your visitor authorization. I didn't see your name--"

You look at the clipboard in your hands. It's the sign-up for the department Fourth of July potluck. No paid party anymore. You meant to grab the sign-in sheet.

"Never mind." You manage to smile at the monster. "I was looking at the wrong list."

"No problem. And Partridge? It's nice to see you."

The monster smiles at you and steps into the elevator. You hear her say, "There's more yet, but Sol's getting back to me today. I'll text you--"

The doors close. The elevator's going down, and you have to go back to the desk to clear the trip downstairs.

She doesn't know, Ash says. *She doesn't know what you did.*

You wonder what you did. *We have to stop her. Put her back in the cage.*

There's another monster in her old cage. Another one like her. The lightning caller.

There's no help for it. You know what you have to do to stop her.

Calmly you walk back to the desk, put the clipboard back, and sit down. You can't do anything else unusual, now that you know what to do.

*

"You're early, big brother."

Eddie sits on a long overstuffed sofa, two seat cushions between him and Natalie, sitting on the other end. They were on the sunny side of the room, where tall, many-paned clear windows with a view of Idlewood's biggest garden let light in. Eddie's scalp showed through the short bristle of his freshly cut hair.

"Thought I'd start coming at this time, so I'm not late for bike polo. Hey, Nats. Was it haircut day?" He's teasing, of course. She couldn't grow two feet of hair in a month.

"This is a wig," she says, and reaches up for Dice's hug.

"You ever see bike polo, Nats? There was a match on that YouTube. You gotta be tough to play that." Eddie says it with pride.

"I haven't seen bike polo," Natalie says. "Did you break anything?"

"I've been lucky," Dice says.

"Natalie plays Go," Eddie says. "She kicks my ass."

"Good. Keep him humble, Nats."

"I will, you bet. 'Scuse me a bit, I'm going to find something to eat."

"Have a strudel?" Dice offers.

"I will have a strudel, and I will still find something to eat. Be back in a bit."

Eddie watches Natalie leave before he gives Dice a *see? I told you so* look. "Board's already set up. You get me cheese strudel?"

"Apple, cheese, poppyseed."

"Best get one while they're hot," Eddie says. "Let's try a Knight's opening today, what do you say?"

"Sure, Eddie. Hey, you get YouTube?"

"We can ask to watch a video on YouTube, but it's restricted. Susanna, the kid, she watches a lot of Netflix." Eddie gets to his feet and they head for the table in the windowed alcove, dappled with shadows cast by a venerable oak.

"All right, so white's opening move is a knight? King's knight or Queen's?"

"You get to pick, big brother."

*

"You're worried, Dann-O," Jason Saito says, once they're seated in their places.

"Everyday stuff. Time for Dallas, right?"

"No. You're giving it up so fast, I want what you're hiding. Is it your girl monster? She's giving you the crawling doubt. She's...up to something," Saito says. "And you don't know what to do."

"Hafidha is fine." Brady rolls his eyes. "I've just got somewhere to go today."

"Gonna see your man? Have what's cooking on the grill, drink beer from a glass, oh, I've got it. You're going to pick out colors for your wedding buffet!" Saito laughs. "And you'll try not to worry that your Girl Wonder is cracking up? Because you are. What's she doing? Give that to me."

"She's visiting a patient today. Latest candidate for the surgery."

"Another adolescent girl? The board has a soft spot for the women. I hear only one man meets their standards. What's with the sexism?"

Brady shrugs. "We teach girls to think of other people before themselves. Probably enhances their empathy through social expectation, by punishing them for asserting themselves the way boys are taught."

"How can you say I don't have any empathy, Dann-O? I literally feel what others feel. That's empathy plus."

"You get off on fear, Saito. Your empathy is the drug lever on a rat cage. That's why you're not a good candidate."

"But that's my point. The chip can teach me a different reward system. That's what it's for, right? That's what it does, right?"

"You should probably talk to Doctor Allison. She's the one who does the assessments, so there's no getting around her."

"That bitch."

"Do you want me to remember Dallas or not?"

"I want you to tell me about Hafida Gates. That chip in her head making her a good girl? Oo. Feel that? I sure did, Dann-O. She's scaring you. Computer girl, with a computer in her head. She can do anything to it, can't she?"

"She's handling the treatment well."

"Liar," Saito murmurs. "You can lie, but why bother? I told you, Dann-O. I'm empath plus."

*

Donatta Fletcher sleeps for another six minutes before waking, and Hafidha Gates is there, spinning silk beside her bed.

"Arachne?" Donatta says, and Hafs parks the spindle.

She finds the cold water bottle and offers it. "Sip. You're still loopy for a bit yet. Let's do the drill. What's today?"

"May 21st, 2014," Donatta says. "My name is Donatta Fletcher. I'm in Idlewood Hospital just outside Ashton, Virginia."

"Okay, you're sharp, kid. But you're going to fall asleep again. How's the melon?"

"About a five. Pounds. Feels hot."

"That's all fine. You dizzy?"

"No."

"Follow my hand and say that," Hafidha says.

"Don't the doctors have to do this?" Donatta asks, and tracks Hafidha's fingers. "Okay, now I'm dizzy."

"I'll get a nurse. Probably you need to sleep more."

"No. Stay. I want to watch you spin. Had a dream," Donatta says. "A weird dream. I was riding a horse inside a long hallway."

Hafidha draws the silk out fine as frog hair. "No river?"

"No river. No underground. Will I dream about it again?"

"Probably. I dream about Erik still. But when you wake up, the chip will activate, and it'll calm you down."

"So I won't be scared any more."

"Only normal scared," Hafidha says, and sends Dr. Allison an email about monitoring fear responses in Donatta's exams.

"And I'll go live upstairs?"

"You'll go live upstairs," Hafs says. "And I'll visit you."

"You said there was a girl my age up there."

"There is. And she knows that you're going upstairs, and she wants to meet you," Hafidha says, and lets the spindle fly. Drafting gives her something to do, so she can be patient.

"What if she..."

"Doesn't like you? You'll get a lot of chances to talk to each other. And she could be worrying exactly the same thing."

"So I should be nice."

"So you should be you, Donna. But I'll give you a tip. Let her show you all her favorite shows. She's really into TV. And I only got fifteen minutes, kid. Try to close your eyes for a bit."

Donna nods, but she's watching Hafidha leave when she looks back.

*

When your lunch break comes, you deliberately take your tray of lasagna to the women's locker room and eat it in a bathroom stall, where no one can see you eat two pounds of ground chicken, pasta, and three kinds of cheese in a creamy tomato sauce. When you finish you put the knife and fork in the dishwasher and take the path to the electrical room. You'll have to turn the generators off first, and then you have about two minutes to shut down two power junctions on the grounds. You have to move fast.

You have to stop her.

You're nearly at the exit door when you have a better idea. You turn around and head for the supermax wing.

*

Dyson Ciesclewicz is getting his ass handed to him.

"Think of the positions," Eddie says. "Look at each piece, see its paths. What do you see?"

"That I'm screwed," Dice says.

"Not quite yet," Eddie laughs. "You've actually set up a really good defense. You could play me to a stalemate, I bet."

"Maybe," Dice says. "Think you're just being nice."

"I mean it. You've covered the board pretty well. I have to sacrifice if I want to break through. Like so--" Eddie moves his bishop, taking a pawn on the edge of the board, in place to take Dice's queen.

"So I should..." Dice slides his rook out, taking the bishop.

"See, last week you would have used your queen and the pressure would be off the center board. You took the move that makes your defense even stronger. You are getting better."

"Speaking of last week..."

Eddie shrugs, and a knight floats on its hooked path to threaten Dice's queen. "Dr. Ramachandran says that he'd been expecting it to happen. I don't have to go downstairs. But therapy sucks now. I have to use the hand and talk about what I feel."

"You know, I did that in physio."

"No, I mean emotional feel."

"I did, too. Sucks. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want."

Dice had cried. Cried with his fists clenched and his arms wrapped tight around his middle. Dice didn't think Eddie would want to talk about that. Those are the girl feelings. You must never go there.

"Doc says that it's important to break down the... mythology. Because raised by a superstitious Catholic, no wait, an asshole who used Catholic superstition as an excuse fucked us up, and left-handedness isn't our fault."

"It isn't."

"Just something you're born with, like eye color and--and stuff," Eddie says.

Dice holds still. "Eddie, are you talking about homosexuality?"

Eddie shrugs up his shoulders. "That's what they say, right? You're just born that way. It's in the brain."

"It might be, yeah." Dice says, and he couldn't have a better opening if he tried. Now or never, into the breach, etc. "Eddie, there's something I've been trying to tell you."

"You're gay."

"Well, shit. Close enough. I like women. I like men. I hid it because I didn't want--I'm the only family you have left, and you're all the family I have and--"

"You like both? But then you can just, you know, be with women. No problem, right?"

The door to the TV room opens, and Natalie walks in, holding it open for Dr. Ramachandran and Susanna Greenwood. Natalie looks at them, then purses her lips up in an "oh." She heads for the couch, browsing through old magazines.

Maybe with this many people in the room, maybe he should stop talking. But he had to get it all out. "Not that easy. And--there's a guy I like," Dice says.

Eddie sits back, tips back on the chair, and when it wobbles he lurched forward and the legs thud on the pine floor, squeal as he stands up and walks away from Dice.

Well. That's it then, Dice thinks.

But then the lights go out.

And they don't come back on.

*

Hafidha wants to probe at Donatta's bugzapper, but she promised not to. Dr. Allison doesn't stop her from checking out her own chip, and uses Hafidha's work to adjust future response programming in other live applications, but she (and Suze Zettler, because she's been talking about this with Suze on just about every trip to her old room in the basement) insist on the importance of doing the science properly, carefully. Maybe in six months they'd know enough of what Hafidha intuitively did to make changes for others. For now she just tweaks the work on herself and dumps the new code.

Dice's pastry lingers in Hafidha's mind. She cocks her head and sends Dice an email: "Lucky. Where are your favorite bakeries? That strudel was good."

She's on her very best manners. She uses his public email instead of just texting his adorable brick of a dumb phone.

She walks from the wing used for surgery to the lobby, and heads for the cafeteria. They don't have strudel, but since Anna had consented to stay close to Idlewood, there could be a wealth of brownies to be eaten if she'd had the chance to make a batch.

She had. Hafidha bought a half dozen--it had just been lunch hour on the floor where she once lived, but there was always room for chocolate. The clear plastic clamshell rested on top of her spindle and fleece, two cartons of milk tucked in beside them. It would be enough for fifteen minutes with Suze.

"You look distracted," the cashier said. "Have you eaten?"

Hafidha stopped her "I'm fine, thanks," to actually think about that. "Actually, I'm not going to get to eat for a couple hours if I don't do it now. Can I get a BLT cheeseburger, fries, gravy, and mozzarella cheese?"

Hafidha hadn't yet paid for her burger when the lights went out.

*

Hurry, Ash whispers. *Hurry. Hurry.*

You run.

Sam asks you to watch the station while he goes to the bathroom. You couldn't ask for anything better.Video shows Hakes in his cell, methodically tearing a copy of *People* magazine into confetti. An empty, soggy plate and fork rest on a cardboard tray. The second the bathroom door closes behind Sam, you open the monster's cage and take off like he's after you, because it could become true in an instant.

Hurry. Hurry.

You run. Your booted feet pound down the linoleum hallway, and you run faster than you ever lope down the trail, just short of a sprint. You slap the doors open and burst through, cutting a hard left to supermax's power box.

"Hey! Partridge! HALT!"

Sam.

Hurryhurryhurryhurry

You're out of reach of the Taser. You think. But you set Ash free with a casting of the power, send her to curse Sam with terror.

When you hear a man screaming a few moments later, you don't know if it's his fear that makes him scream, or if Hakes has made it past the doors to

supermax.

You don't really need to know.

You skid to a halt in front of the power room, pull the big switch, and dash out the door.

You can get back to the cage, with the power to protect you. You can get rid of the lightning caller, and if Hafidha Gates manages to survive Hakes, your power can take her down long enough to put her back where she belongs.

Where she can't take Ash away from you.

*

Solomon Todd stares at his computer screen. A cold heady pressure sits inside him, under and behind the rib cage, as if somebody reached inside him and grabbed a handful of intestine and twisted. Icy fear, cold and sharp.

A credit card transaction. Just one; and it could be coincidence or carelessness or arrogance, but he knows. He knows what it means.

He picks up his phone to call Hafidha, and it rings to voice mail, which by itself is enough to give him a nasty start. But then he glances at the screen when he cancels the call and sees the date. *Wednesday, May 21st, 2014.*

Visiting day at the monster zoo.

He shoves his feet into loafers on the way out the door, grabs his keys, stops with his hand on the knob. Calls Falkner as he heads back into the bedroom to open the gun safe and get heeled. He'll feel like an idiot if he's overreacting. He'll feel like more of an idiot if he's lying there bleeding out on the floor.

*

"It was just another day," Brady says. "We thought we had a missing girl, but she'd just gone for a nap outside. Happy ending. So I decided that I would bring home dinner and get some boyfriend points. I didn't know that anything was wrong."

"Sno-ore," Saito says. "So worn out. Gates has gone rogue, hasn't she? She's put on a pretty face and everyone's fooled except you."

Brady doesn't cross his arms. He wants to. "It really didn't hit me until I realized that he didn't have a scalpel in his hand. That's what I thought it was."

"You're the only one who can tell that the monster's loose, and no one will believe you if you try to say anything. I know what you're hiding, Agent Brady."

"But when it did... I trusted Andre. I remembered how many nights I'd just

sleep next to him, let him touch me with hands that could do that."

"You let her touch everyone on the team. You have to. You are supposed to believe in her. But she's doing things, isn't she? She's going backward, not forward, and she's going to catch everyone by surprise."

"He could cut. He could stitch it back up. And he didn't use it to help people. He used it to torture. It didn't matter that he believed that he was doing justice."

"You're the one who sees her doing what she thinks is justice. You can see her failing. And you're going to have to kill her. Just like you had to kill Andre."

"If I could go back to that day I'd talk him down. If I'd known about the ACTF, I could have saved him."

"You can't save her. You can't save anyone."

The room went dark, and Brady hit the floor rolling, right and backwards, came up in a crouch. Pure instinct

"Oh..." Saito purrs in the dark. "Oh, Agent Brady. This. Oh yes, this. Perfect. All these years you've been stringing me along, and all we had to do was turn the lights out."

Act IV

The lights go out and everyone looks up. The generator will kick in. They'll have to wait for the computers running the cash register to reboot. Hafs sighs. That burger she wants rests in its own grease on top of a cooling grill, and right at the minute she's hungry. In another minute she'll be irritable. In another minute after that she'll have trouble remembering that the people around her don't deserve what she'll dish out. A hungry gamma ain't nobody's friend.

The lights still aren't on. Hafidha reaches out, probing for working computers, smartphones, tablets. All she finds are mobile devices, struggling on the shitty data network that passes for coverage. She reaches for the programmable controls on the emergency generators and finds nothing--just a black hole.

And that should not be happening.

"FBI," Hafidha says in a carrying voice. "Please remain calm. Look around, and find someone who could use your help, and use that emergency exit." She spots one guy headed toward the door to the corridor: the wrong way. Toward the monsters. The other monsters. *I am the evil that exists to oppose other evils.* "Please don't leave this room, sir. Everybody needs to go outside, get away from the building, and take cover."

She reaches out into the wide world, surfing the two and a half bars Sprint offers. A text message to Falkner, a text message to Chaz. *Bad things at Arkham. Power out. Evacuating staff such as I can.* She is doing okay. Doing okay. She opens the pastry case for the last four brownies, peels the plastic off of one, and starts eating. Between bites: "Everyone, it's very important that you remain calm and leave. Who's in the kitchen?"

She gets people assigned to each other and sends them out the cafeteria emergency exits. No alarms greet the opening doors. She sweeps the kitchen to be sure everyone is out, and finishes the second brownie.

She needs more milk, and the bottles in the fridge aren't doing anything but going bad. She takes one and washes the gooey chocolate treat down, eats her third, and tucks the fourth away with the rest.

The civilians are leaving. Orderly evacuation. She thinks about school shootings, workplace violence. All the things it could be that aren't the monster zoo with its cages wide open. She touches her hip, where her Glock isn't. *The only thing that stops a bad man with a gun is a good man with a gun.*

She thinks, *Well now, there's a simplistic morality for you.*

She steps out through the hall door she shooed everyone away from, staying low, moving quick. It's even darker in the hall, just the red glow of the battery-operated emergency exit signs to guide her. She steps out of her boots, snaps the heels off with bare hands. Gamma-strong. She feels a pang when she does it that's not just a shallow attachment to material goods.

The boots go back on her feet. The heels go in her pocket. She knows a cobbler who might be able to fix them, later. Now she walks softer.

She doesn't get very far before she hears fear.

She doesn't get much farther than that before she finds blood.

*

Jason Saito is a shadow among shadows. He rustles faintly as he stands. "Finally," he says, in a tone that makes Brady imagine a stretching, satisfied cat. "It's my big break. Let's go."

Brady hears his heart in his ears. He forces himself to relax, to feel nonchalant. His best weapon against Jason Saito is never to show fear, which means never feeling fear. "You think I'm going somewhere with you, Saito?"

"I think you are," Saito comes closer, offering Brady his wrist shackles. Brady has a flashlight on his keychain, but he's not about to let Saito know that. Saito says, "I'm your best weapon right now. You got enough bullets for every

gamma in Arkham? That's what Hafidha calls it."

"You know I don't have a key for those," Brady says. "I don't have a key for the door, either. We're just going to have to wait it out until the lights come back on."

And there's Saito, looming over him. Danny fights the urge to jump. He was, of course, expecting something like this. Saito coos, "Ooh, Danny. That felt good. Come on now. It'll be worth it just for the expression in your amygdala. You don't have a key, but there's somebody on the outside who does. Who's just waiting for you to ask to be released."

"What makes you think I'm going to let you be my backup?"

"I could make wild threats, you know. Say something like, 'On account of I will kill you right now and then you won't get to save anyone. I'll join the scrum.'" Then Saito sighs, as if he's even bored himself. "You forget, Danny-boy. I know what scares you most. It's your friends getting hurt when you can't help them--or worse, having to hurt them yourself. And your pet monster is out there in the dark, isn't she? Who *knows* what she's getting up to, in all those miles and miles of twisty corridors. Being in here is boring. I need a *change,* Dann-O. A catalyst. This is a sign. I'll help you if you help me."

This is a bad idea, Brady thinks, and to himself he answers, *No shit, Sherlock.*

He stands himself. Saito moves back, gives only a little room. He's still crowding Brady's personal space. Brady looms over him, but he doesn't feel in control.

"The cuffs stay on," he says.

"Talk rough to me, Danny," Saito purrs.

*

Hafidha crouches in blood, hoping her texts got through. The shoes are really one hundred percent ruined now: she can feel the sticky sliding wetness soaking in through their seams.

The woman lies sprawled on her back, her wild hair spread out all around her and stuck to the floor. She's fallen out of her own towering open-toed shoes. *Can't run in those,* Hafidha thinks. *Shouldn't have had to.*

Oh God. Oh, Kat.

Hafidha reaches out a hand in the red-lit dark and touches Katharine Allison's arm. It's warm, and she's breathing--more than breathing, gasping. Because her blood volume is low, and her body wants oxygen.

"Thirsty," Kat whispers.

Hafidha strokes her sticky hair. She says, "It's me, Kat. It's Hafidha."

"Hakes," Kat says.

Hafidha knows. She knew as soon as she stepped into the corridor and caught the thick ocean scent of all that warm, wet blood.

"I'll get him for you, Doc."

"No...." *No don't leave you can't leave you can't leave me*

Hafidha reaches to the tasseled bead bracelet on her right wrist, yanks it, and lets the elastic snap. "Zap," she whispers, and the heat that prickled across her scalp irons itself out.

Or did Kat mean, *No, don't risk yourself--*

Hafidha knows she'll never know.

She wheezes. So much blood. Warm, so warm. Chuck Palahniuk always was full of shit. Kat says, "Henry... ran."

Aw, hell. Doc was with Henry Clark. Henry... who isn't well. And he's out there now in the dark alone. At least it's May in Virginia, Hafidha reminds herself. At least it's a sunny day, and the Idlewood climate control is as dead as the generators.

At least Henry's not going to get cold.

Hafidha still feels sick. She's still watching a friend die, and there's nothing she can do.

Except kneel in Dr. Allison's blood, except grab her doctor's hand, slick with her own life coating the tidy nails, the dainty watch on her wrist, except to try and get through to whatever hadn't drained out with the four pints on the floor.

"Fuck professional distance. I'm here, Doc. I'm right here. You're not alone."

Dr. Allison's hand trembles, squeezes once. *Yes*. But then she lets go, and Hafidha feels through the already thickening blood for a pulse.

Don't be an idiot, you're kneeling in her blood.

Reyes and Todd had taken Hakes down in a funhouse. Reyes nearly died anyway. She didn't have a funhouse. She didn't have Solomon Todd and his peculiar luck. But Brady is--

Shit.

Brady's with Saito.

Hafidha needs to fetch him. With any luck, Saito will want to take his time.

She can drop Hakes if she can get the shot before he sees her. She doesn't miss. She might even be able to drop him if he does see her, as long as she does it fast enough that she can still aim.

She needs a weapon, first of all. Fortunately, the cafeteria's near the front desk.

She pats Katharine Allison's warm cheek, checks the pockets of her bloodstained lab coat, finds keys, a keycard, a runner's can of pepper spray. She stands up. Weapon. Brady. Hakes. Whoever the hell started this. In that order, and spaced out neatly, please.

Hafidha Gates slips through the crimson shadows, keeping her head low, clearing each corridor before she steps into it. Leaving a trail of blood.

*

Hafidha knocks on the locked door of the video room and makes sure to stand in plain sight of the reinforced window. She sighs in relief when the door opens and she sees who's on duty.

"Leon," Hafidha says, tone low, hands open. "I know you know me. You know I'm one of them. But I have to ask you to believe me right now."

He doesn't have a weapon out. But he's halfway to reaching for it. He says, very calmly, "Whose blood is that, Agent Gates?"

"Larry's out," she answers. "This--" Her voice catches. She scrubs her hands down the sides of her suit coat. "Kat," she says, miserably, because one syllable is all she can squeeze out through her tightening throat.

"Jesus fucking Christmas," Leon says. "Anyone else hurt? Loose?"

"Clark," she says, getting herself back. "Kat was taking him for a walk when... I don't know if he'll be a threat. Maybe more in danger himself. But Leon, somebody turned off the power, and somebody sprang Bloody Larry, and that somebody is still a threat."

"Right," he said.

"Lend me your tablet and your sidearm, and I will go in there and hunt the monsters. I promise I will tell people I took the gun from you and you couldn't stop me."

"Why the tablet?" But he's already handing it over, Bloody Larry's name like a passkey. He slides his gun along the surface of the desk, and he's trying the bottom right drawer with the toe of his boot.

"Sometimes it helps to have a focus even if you don't need it," Hafs says. She passes her fingers over it, frowning, and then hands it back. "That's a chat

window. You can type to me and I can type to you."

"This is the only extra clip," Leon says, and Hafs tucks it up her sleeve for want of a better place.

He pauses. "Wait, those shoes--"

"It is what it is," she says, hearing Brady and Falkner in her own tones. The Army mantra.

"Partridge keeps a pair of Chucks in her locker. They might be big on you, but they have rubber soles." He produces a pair of dikes from his desk drawer and snips the master lock--Hafidha has to help, both of them leaning on the handles to cut the tempered steel. They clear the lock and yank the locker open.

"Shit," Hafidha says.

There are the Chuck Taylors, front and center, on the little top shelf. They're bright green and look nearly new. But other than that, the locker is full of cloth shopping bags, hanging on the hooks where you'd keep your purse, and your coat and scarf in wintertime. And those bags are full of cheap candy: Easter markdowns, the Russell Stover shit.

"You don't know she let Hakes out," Leon said.

"I don't know she didn't, either." Hafidha plunges both hands into a bag and fills a pocket of her bloody velvet suit jacket with Creme Eggs and Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs. Every little bit counts. "Lock the door behind me. Bar it with a chair. Cover the damned window with anything you've got.

"Duct tape."

The shoes aren't half bad. She wishes she had socks; Chucks give you blisters without them, and she's only wearing stockings. "Perfect. Don't let him see you."

Leon smiles. "I'll watch your purse."

Hafs pulls the extinction-threatened brownies out before she hands it over. "And the video if it comes back on. But Leon. I took your gun. Stay in this room. Stay on comm. Don't move. I need you. And keep calling those ACTF numbers. The landlines might come back first. You need to get my team. Don't let anybody in here."

"Except the--"

"No." Hafs bit out. "No one. Do you hear me? Bloody Larry didn't pick the lock with a hangnail. We don't know who let him out, and you are going home today. You are going home today. So don't you let anybody in here. Not even

me."

"But--"

"Whoever let him out might be a monster, too." Hafs jerks her thumb at the open locker. She puts her hand on the knob.

"Wait," Leon says. "You're gonna be working hard out there." He slides the box of strudels over, still three left. "Take those. And my Gatorade."

"Leon, you know how to take care of a lady. Get under cover and hide."

*

"What's happening?" Natalie asks. "Did the power go out?"

"The emergency lights should have kicked in," Susanna says. "They'll kick in any minute, right?"

"One moment." That's Dr. Ramachandran, and he walks over to the wall-mounted Bakelite phone. He picks it up, listen, and puts it back on the hook. "The internal telephone system is down. This is a full power outage. The phone system should work if the generators are operating."

"Doc? Do you have a cell phone?" Dice asks.

Dr. Ramachandran shakes his head. "Phones demand attention. I left it in the office when I came in here to talk to you."

Dice holds up his Nokia. "Mine's not smart." He powers it on anyway. "I have signal."

"Do me a favor, Mr. Cieslewicz, and turn your phone to silent," Dr. Ramachandran says.

Dice was already cycling through the menu to do just that.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Eddie says. "Real bad, Doc."

"I'm worried, too," Dr. Ramachandran says. "What will help you, Eddie?"

"If everyone would get under cover, I mean out of line of sight from the door, and away from the windows," Eddie says. "On this side of the door, at least, so the room looks empty--"

"Shh," Dice says, straining to hear. "That's screaming."

It was.

"That's close by. Get cover, now. Please." Eddie moves over and stands to the right of the door.

"Who the hell do I call? 911? They'll be lunch," Dice whispers. "Danny Brady and Hafidha Gates are in the building, do I call them?"

"Try a text message," Natalie says. She's got a liter sport bottle of water and she's squeezing it like a baby doll.

Dice runs his thumbs over the keys, typing as fast as he can:

Tank sos no power 4th flr TV rm

The screen lights up when Daniel Brady replies with only one word:

Hide.

*

Hafidha found Sam on the way to the interview room where Brady should be with Saito. He's beyond help--beyond even comfort. Now his blood dries on her hands, too, black in the glow of the emergency lights. She moves fast, Leon's pistol at low safe. A ricochet in these old brick corridors could have disastrous results.

The door to the interview room stands open. There's Rufus, sitting against the wall with his knees drawn to his chest. Incapacitated, though Hafidha can't say for now just how. He's alive, though, and when he sees Hafidha backlit by the exit sign his eyes go wide. She starts to come to him, but he shakes his head and jerks a thumb down the corridor. *They went thataway.*

And not long ago, either, if Rufus pressing his finger to his lips is anything to go on.

At least he's not curled in a puddle of his own red.

She catfoots around the corner in Emily Partridge's shoes and sees two men at the far end of the hall, just coming up on the fire doors. The smaller walks ahead of the larger, in that duck-walk shuffle of the shackled, and Hafidha's heart skips a beat in relief when the larger turns sideways against the hellish glow of the emergency exit sign. She'd know Brady's Robert Redford profile anywhere.

She reaches out to find Brady's phone--she doesn't need a network this close--and pings it.

He raises it without looking away from Saito, and she knows what he reads. *I'm in your six.*

"Stop," he says, and Saito stops. Brady steps back, creating a triangle and putting Saito in between them now. Hafidha walks forward, leaving her gun low. As she comes up, Brady's eyes widen and Saito smirks.

So much blood all over her.

"So," Saito drawls--he learned his delivery and most of his dialogue from every crappy horror movie you've ever seen, "kitty found a plaything? I told you monsters don't get better, Danny-boy."

Brady doesn't shift his focus off Saito, but she knows he's seen her. And all that blood. "Motherfucker, Hafidha. *What did you do?*"

It stings. Even though she knows she deserves it--*Fuck you, Bug: it's you that deserves it, not me*.

"Hakes is out. He got Kat and Sam."

"Danny," Saito says. "Are you going to believe that?"

"What happened to Rufus?" she asks, ignoring Saito and his rattlesnake tongue. Ignoring the fact that Brady's eyes shift, for just a second.

Brady says, "Don't know. Total fear response. I couldn't move him and keep control of Jason, here."

"You have something to do with that, Saito?" Hafidha asks. "New manifestation? Practicing up?"

He shrugs. His shackles rattle. "Would you believe me if I said no?"

"I'm taking him back to his cell," Brady says. "Or I was--"

Something tickles in Hafidha. Sharp pain. Panicky. A splitting murder behind her eyes. She doubles over, nearly jerks her hands up to her face. Remembers Leon's Glock at the last second, keeps her hand down, gives herself a cookie for decent trigger discipline. Massad Ayoob and Solomon Todd would be proud.

Fear now, so much fear. Blossoming. She feels like a car in neutral with the accelerator pressed. Roaring, and going nowhere.

She wants to run. Curl up. Throw herself into a corner and die. Hide under a bed, a desk. Anything.

Shoot it. Shoot everything. There's a gun in her hand. There's a threat right in front of her. A threat that is moving. She hears the clink of his chains. His silky, silky voice.

The monster comes toward her. Shut it up, shut it up, shut it--

Vaguely, she hears grunts. Struggling. Heavy footsteps. Brady makes a noise of pain.

Blindly, groping, the fingers of her right hand find her left wrist. She hooks

them through the elastic, pulls, snaps. *Zap.*

Revision 1.21a.

And it is gone. The pain. the fear. Everything. Everything is slick and harmless and ironically interesting and so, so distant and cool. She looks up, a wary animal, and finds herself staring right into Jason Saito's eyes.

His wide, incredulous eyes. His nose inches inches from hers. He'd been leaning in, she realized. Captivated by the aroma of her fear.

Behind him, she glimpses Brady on the floor, heaving one knee under himself. Doubled over as he rises.

"Shit," Saito says. "You're just like me."

She pistol-whips him with the barrel of Leon's gun.

He staggers back, clutching his broken cheekbone--even a gamma notices another gamma's blow. And she would have been on top of him, swinging again, but Brady beats her to it. Barrels into Saito, scoops him up, lifting the smaller man on tiptoe and swinging him around. Hand to hand with a gamma. Hafidha sees Saito bent over, his neck locked under Brady's arm.

"Danny," Saito says, "you wouldn't hold it against me, would you?"

She doesn't follow the next move, exactly. But Brady goes down hard--a backward shoulder roll *over* Saito's head. And Hafidha Gates thinks that if she lives to be a thousand--world's oldest metabolic freak--she'll never get over the sound of Saito's skull hitting the floor, and the crunch of bone that comes with it.

Brady heaves himself up and shakes Saito by the head like a dog murdering a stuffed giraffe. Something snaps heavily and Saito's feet flop like a doll's. Kick like a hanged man's.

Brady drops Saito on the floor. Heavy, limp, like an armload of wet laundry. He heaves in a couple of breaths. Pushes himself up straight, painfully.

Looks up at her. Face so still.

"You had to," Hafs said. "What were we going to do, tie him up and leave him for Larry?"

Still, Brady shakes his head. "I would have thought that would be a lot more satisfying."

She nods. "I'll try not to enjoy it for both of us, then." A long pause. "You broke his neck."

"Maybe tore his carotid. It's pretty hard to break a neck. We'll ask Frost, if we

get out of here."

He's still looking at her. Looking at her bright green shoes, not so green in the exit-sign hell-light. Looking at the blood. He holds his hands away from himself as if they were floury. Greasy.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Somebody put a whammy on me," she says. "Remember the reporter? I think I know why he drove into the tree."

"So we've got a hex *and* a gremlin." His eyes ask, *And you beat it how?*

She touches the back of her head, where the bugzapper lives. "I turned off my fear."

"Is that a smart move?"

She shrugs. "No. But it's working for now."

She waits. Eventually, said into the silence of labored breathing, she asks him, "Do you want the gun?"

"How'd you get it?"

"Leon's," she says. "I told him to lock himself in."

Brady stares a little longer. Purses lips. Nods. "You keep it," he says. "You're a better shot."

"Somebody around here," she says softly, "has a panic button. And I think I know who."

She turns around and calls. "Emily? We don't want to hurt you. Why don't you come out, now?"

*

You run. Though you're dizzy with starving, you run.

You can't stop running. The monster's right behind you. And she's calling your name. She knows, she does know. And Ash can't help you. You sent Ash to her, and she... she's a ghost eater, a soul-eater. She swallowed Ash right up, fought her, shook her off, and won.

The monster is stronger than Ash.

You can't let her be stronger than you.

There's a cage here that can hold, her, though. All you need is to lure her into it.

You need bait.

And the perfect bait already lives in the cage.

You run.

*

Brady shadows Hafs as she slips back to Rufus. He's crawled under his desk. Motion, good. A positive sign.

And it's probably the safest place for him, if Bloody Larry happens to wander by.

Hafs crawls under the desk with him, comes back out with something. Rufus's headset and mic, battery-operated. She hands them to Brady, who puts them on without complaining. He watches as she goes to a locker--cool, efficient, without a wasted gesture--and pulls out a pair of gas masks. She tosses Brady one.

"You planning on--"

"There's the pepper spray," she says. "If we get juice back, I can fog for gammas."

"That's just gonna make Hakes angry."

"Line of sight," she says. "How's he going to target if I blind him?"

Brady mines a slow clap and pulls the gas mask over his head, checking to make sure it's got a filter. He leaves it around his neck for now. He'll hear the hiss if she uses the spray.

Hafidha pulls off her glasses and tucks them in her pocket.

"This is going to fuck up my accuracy," she says. She's been leaving a Hansel and Gretel line of Creme Egg wrappers behind her. Now she adds another to the trail.

She hands Brady her gun for a moment, adjusting the other gas mask on top of her head.

"Hold my gun and watch this," Brady mutters.

She laughs. "Easier without the braids," she says sadly.

He resists the urge to stroke her arm. "I wish Chaz was here," Brady says.

They share a tired smile. "I'm glad he's not," she says through his headset. "Bad enough that we are. Can you hear me?"

He nods. "Where are you going?"

"After Partridge," she says. "If she's opening cages... who's next worst? Say you wanted a WMD..."

"Hector?"

"Reyes has been getting through to him." Then her face does a strange thing--startled realization. But without any *fear,* exactly. "Shit. Mrs. Chow."

Brady nods. "Check on it. I got an SOS from Dice. I'm going to see if I can get the rec room evacuated. Then look for Hakes."

"And Henry," she says.

"Henry's not a threat for six months or so."

"Hakes is a threat to Henry. God, I hope Renee has the sense to stay in her room."

"Who?"

"Oh, very funny." She puts her hand out for the Glock, then pulls it back. "You know what? If you're going to get Larry... You keep the gun."

"Hafs?"

"Gamma," she says. "And anyway, Gray would never forgive me."

*

Renee should have stayed in her room. She wishes like hell she'd had the sense to stay in her room. But she didn't, and when she went to look for somebody she could ask about the power outage, she found the old white man wandering alone down a corridor in the dark. She knows by his clothes--scrubs and a bathrobe--that he's one of the patients, and one who should be on a locked ward. He's also wearing two cardigans, a knitted cap, and a scarf that looks like Hafidha knitted it for him.

She knows who this is. Not that they tell the other patients all about one another, but she spent enough time in the bullpen. And she knows she ought to be afraid of him.

But he looks harmless. He looks *confused.* And scared. And he shouldn't be left to wander around.

So she exerts herself to stay present for him, and she walks up and takes his hand. She's discovered that touching people makes her stay real for longer. It's the next best thing to having a door between them.

"I'm Renee," she says. His hand is cool and papery. He smiles. "Are you Henry?"

"I got lost. Something happened, and--" He looks down.

Her gaze follows his. His paper slippers are soaked in something dark.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he says. "I'm not cold at all."

That's when the screaming starts, down the corridor to the left. The minimum security wing. Closest to the offices, and Renee's room.

Henry flinches. She holds his hand. "Stay with me, Henry."

He smiles at her mildly. "Hello, sweetheart. Who are you?"

*

The screaming stopped a long time ago, but Dice still hunches behind a flipped table, covering Susanna with his body. She keeps her hands pressed against the floor, beneath her, so she doesn't touch him accidentally. Next to her, wedged beside the wall, Natalie seems to contract like a shocked amoeba as she pulls herself in. Despite the cramped space, she manages not to let any portion of her body brush anyone else.

Ramachandran is across the room, behind the desk with two staffers. And Eddie--

Dice pokes his head up over the table edge. Eddie stands by the hinge side of the door, swinging his arms like a batter warming up outside the box. "Eddie," Dice hisses. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Eddie gives him a look, and a big fake grin. The same kind of bravado Dice remembers from when Eddie was seven and about to get himself in miserable trouble.

"Don't sweat it, big brother," Eddie says. "I got this."

And then, in the hall, singing.

Ragged, off-key. But cheery. Something from the seventies. Gordon Lightfoot, Dice realizes. "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald."

There are footsteps, too. And the sound of something metal tapped against the wall. This is not the voice of a cheery repairman. Dice realizes that somebody could see him through the window in the door and ducks down, way down. Flattening himself against Susanna.

Cramped though it is, he texts: *He's here.* Hits send, and puts the phone away as fast as possible. Wishes for a minute that he was still Catholic enough to pray.

Someone tries the door.

It's locked, so the handle rattles. Dice remembers the tapping metal, and doesn't expect that to hold whoever it is for long. He thinks about velociraptors in the kitchen, and stifles a hysterical giggle.

There's a thump. One, then another. Testing. Then a steady, rhythmic beat.

"Fire axe," Natalie says. She sounds so calm, a little exasperated. Like a supervillain chopping the door down is an everyday nuisance.

Dice's gaze fixes on a chair. Just one of the plastic garden chairs the residents get to use. Not a weapon, which is why they have it. It's close enough to grab and throw--but would it do any good?

It might buy Eddie a second. It might buy Natalie a second, and Dice can see from the look on her thin pretty face that she's not going to go down without fighting. But she has to get close, and the door is all the way across the room--

The chopping stops, is replaced by a prying creak and crackle. Then a hesitation. Then a hard, hard thump--the impact of foot on wood. These doors are as old as Idlewood, oak and chestnut, solid core. Cut from trees of a size that haven't been seen on the East Coast in over a century.

It holds for a second, and buys them all another second of life.

Dice hears a frustrated, animal sound through the door. He squeaks, like a mouse, and Susanna gives him a comforting little headbutt since she can't squeeze his hand.

"Don't worry, Dyson," Natalie says. "I've been in worse spots."

That's when Dice notices that she's taken off her gloves.

The door crashes open, rebounds, is caught. Dice hopes Eddie blocked it with his Hand rather than taking it in the face, but he doesn't have time to think about it now.

"Hide-and-seek?" says a shockingly ordinary voice. "That's one of my favorite games."

Dice jerks himself to his feet, not daring to think. He grabs the featherweight plastic chair and slings it overhand, screaming, then leaps over the table to follow it up with a charge.

He makes it two steps. And then he stops, not because he runs into some enormous wall of anomalous energy, but because what he sees is Eddie swinging out from behind the broken door and piling into the side of the brown-haired, balding, middle-aged guy who stands there lazily swinging a fire axe. It's the Hand that Eddie hits the other guy with, and the other guy--

skinny, unprepossessing--bounces off the doorframe and staggers a step.

The walls shake. Plaster dust sparkles in the sunlight through the window.

But the other guy comes back swinging. Definitely a jammer, to take a hit like that. He's got the axe, and he knows how to use it. It loops into the air. Eddie blocks it with the Hand. The axe doesn't rebound; Eddie's grabbed it, grabbed it with thin air. He rips it out of the other guy's hand and swings it around--

Eddie screams. He clutches his gut, though the other guy hasn't touched him, and doubles over. Blood--so much fucking blood, everywhere, suddenly, pouring from his nose and eyes, soaking his trousers. Dice screams, too, "Leave my brother alone!" and plunges forward again. Eddie's dropped the axe, and Dice is aiming for it. But he skids in the blood, scrabbles, clutches the damned thing's handle and finds himself flailing on his back like a turtle.

He looks up, and sees the man who has to be Joseph Lawrence Hakes--Bloody Larry, though Dice isn't supposed to know about that--looming over him.

"You're adorable," Hakes says, and lifts up one hand to make a goddamned finger-gun. A sharp cramp spears Dice's middle.

The axe is wrenched from his hand and whirls through the air. For a moment, in passing, Dice would swear he felt the brush of his brother's nonexistent fingertips. Hakes ducks; the axe thumps into the doorframe; the seething feeling in Dice's gut eases. He tastes seaweed and copper. He sees Eddie straighten up, ripping the axe free with the Hand.

Dice hears Hakes' howl of outraged fury, and the slippery horrible thump as Eddie crumples and falls.

Dice lifts his head. The axe is all the way over there--

A blur. Red hair, quick hands. Natalie, wielding her bottle of water like a sword. Clear fluid splashes from it, a bright arc, slashing across Hakes' face. Washing into his eyes. His wordless rage turns into a scream of pain; he clutches his face, then casts about blindly.

Acid, Dice thinks, but some of the fluid splashed him, too, and on his lips he tastes the unmistakable fizz. It burns worse than he's used to. It must be very concentrated.

"Peroxide," he says.

"Chemically, very similar to water," Natalie remarks. She grabs his collar and his belt loop and drags him back, away, toward Ramachandran and the staff. "I need a better trick. He isn't down."

And Eddie is. Lying in the blood, not moving. Still bleeding, a slow well

visible between his lips. How fast can you drown in your own blood? If you're a gamma? How fast then?

If you're a gamma, how fast do your eyes clear from a chemical burn?

Hakes has staggered away from the door. He's casting about, groping: a hellish game of blindman's bluff. Dice sees Susanna raise her head from behind the table and begin creeping--tiptoeing--toward the axe. He wants to yell to her to watch out, but that'll give the game away.

Then the part that seems like a hallucination happens. Because Dice sees an old man walk into the room--sedately, unconcerned. And with him, a young mixed-race woman, holding his hand. Except, is she there, or is she not? When he's looking at her, he can see her clear as day. But as soon as he glances back at Hakes, Dice is pretty sure he imagined her.

She leads the old man up to Hakes, though, and the old man stops in front of him. Hakes windmills, and the old man just stands.

"You, fellow," the old man says. "You need to stop that right now."

Hakes stops. Perfectly balanced, suddenly, though his eyes are swollen shut and even from across the room, flat on his back, Dice can see whitish foam bubbling from between the lids.

"Who are you?" Hakes asks. He reaches out, slowly, calibrating on the voice.

The old man draws himself up. "Someone whose home this is, sonny. And you won't take the roof from over my head, or from over these people's heads, either. I won't have it. People need to keep warm!"

Hakes' clutching hands grasp the old man's arm, twisting in layers of robe and cardigan. Dice tries to start to his feet, but Natalie gives his clothes a yank and he falls back down again. Susanna has forgotten she was going to get the axe and is just crouched now, staring.

"Don't call me sonny," says Joseph Lawrence Hakes. He reaches blindly toward the old man's head.

"Respect your elders," the old man answers. He lifts up his free hand--clad in a fingerless mitt that Dice recognizes as Hafidha's knitting. He presses the tips of his fingers to the side of Hakes' head.

Hakes jerks, recoils. But the old man is holding *his* sleeve now, and he can't pull away. Hakes' hand seems to be stuck to the old man's cheek as if frozen there, and a bluish rime is spreading up his hand, up his arm, along his temple, down his throat. He gasps, shivers violently, sags to his knees. He falls, and the old man bends over him. His teeth chatter. His heels rattle against the floor. He screams a long, shivering scream.

No one steps forward until he finally lies still.

The old man straightens up and dusts the frost off his hands. "Ahh," he says, pink and happy. "Who'd like a nice cup of coffee, now?"

Dice yanks himself away from Natalie. He crawls across the floor, the terrible cramps not yet subsiding. He drags himself through the slick of Eddie's blood. He sprawls across his brother's good arm and tries to press his fingers to Eddie's throat.

Eddie's eyes blink. They focus on Dice. Eddie's lips move, and something like the touch of phantom fingers ruffles Dice's hair.

"It's okay," Eddie says. "It's okay, big brother."

The breath finishes coming out of him.

It does not go back in.

Dice puts his head down on Eddie's bloody shirt and wails between clenched teeth, not even able to form the word, *no*.

"Fuck," says Natalie, behind Dice. "I know this isn't the time or the place, but I need a sandwich *right now*."

*

Sol feels a spurt of sweet relief when his phone rings, and he recognizes the number as the main line at Idlewood. *It's all okay,* he tells himself. *Something we'll laugh about tomorrow.*

Falkner forwarded him Hafidha's text. He knows Falkner, Chaz, Lau, and Tan are running close behind him. He knows that they're coming in force, and that Falkner's made the decision not to involve the local sheriff's department. He thinks that that turned out to be a good call.

The relief lasts until he answers the phone and hears a tight, controlled voice on the other end of the line, faint Puerto Rican accent, crispness of a professional in an emergency. "Mr. Todd?"

"Speaking."

"This is Leon Garcia at Idlewood. Hafidha Gates asked me to call you. We have a big, big problem here."

"Leon," Sol says. "Is Rupert Beale there?"

"He was," Leon says. "He was the last sign-out before the power went down."

*

Daniel Brady has probably felt this useless once or twice before in his life, but

just right now he is hard pressed to think of when. He stands in the doorway of the minimum security rec room and counts bodies. Only two, and it could have been worse. And one of those is the right one, the best of all possible worlds if there has to be a casualty.

But then there's Eddie, and--

Not now, Danny Brady, he tells himself. He looks around at the survivors. At Dice with Eddie's head cradled in his lap. At Natalie stuffing a handful of Cheetos into her mouth, and Henry Clark--*what the hell*--pouring cream into a steaming mug of coffee. At Susanna, huddled over beside Ramachandran and two staffers whose names Brady doesn't know, offhand, though Hafidha would. And that flicker of movement in the corner of his eye is probably Renee.

He had come into the room at high ready, and now they are all staring at him. Sheepishly, he lowers the muzzle. Stopping Hakes was only half his job.

"Come on," he says. "We're evacuating. There's at least one more on the loose."

The awful fluorescent lights overhead pick that instant to hum violently and buzz back into life.

*

Somebody was in for a hiding if Sol ever found them. It had taken him a good three minutes to hotwire a switch to replace the smashed controls on the emergency generators, and he'd jammed a wire right up under his thumbnail, deep enough to make it bleed. The good news is, they are humming now. And as he is clearing the area outside before stepping from the shelter of the generator shed, his phone buzzes against his hip.

He glances at it. It's Brady.

He slides a thumb across the glass. "Talk to me," he says.

*

The lights flicker. Stutter. Go back on and burn steady, and Hafidha pulls the gas mask down over her face and walks a little slower, a little more carefully, now. She's coming up on the doorway to the wing of Idlewood where the old monsters live, and she's wondering just what exactly she, gunless, is going to do if she opens up that door with Allison's passcard and discovers Mrs. Chow crouched in the corridor, chewing on somebody's thighbone like the law of conservation of mass and energy doesn't apply.

Throw the last pocketful of Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs at her and run.

Then there's a crackle in her head, and a few hundred yards away, Leon types

on a tablet with his thumbs.

EMILY IS ON CAMERA. HEADED TO YOUR OLD ROOM.

Suze Zettler's room. There's probably a more politic way for Leon to have put it, but Hafs isn't about to pick nits with the man whose pastry is keeping her from fainting.

She types back, STAY FROSTY.

Brady, on the headset. "Hakes is neutralized. Evacuating the minimum security residents. I have Henry, and I think maybe I have Renee, too. One casualty."

She doesn't ask who. If it weren't going to upset her, he would have said already.

She breathes a sigh of relief. "Good work."

Brady says, "Duke says the cavalry is ETA five minutes."

Hafidha says, "Partridge is going after Suze."

There's a pause. Then, "Godspeed," he tells her. Which is fine. If she's going to put up with anybody's God, Daniel G. Brady's is high on the list. And his secret middle name is safe with her.

"Radio silence," she replies.

"For now," he answers.

She turns right back away from the door to the scary wards and heads downstairs. Not that her old room is any less fortified. Not that anything is scaring her, right now.

Maybe she'll be able to talk to Partridge. Maybe she can figure out her mythology. Hafidha remembers that weird interaction this morning and doesn't stop walking, but she bites her lip. Something there, some clue.

She and Brady had been talking about Ashley Campbell, just a moment before, who had died in an accident caused by a bizarre mechanical failure. And the reporter who died, Matthew Sheehy. The reporter whose freak accident had not included a mechanical failure, but apparently something like the fear Hafidha had so recently experienced herself.

Oh. If Ashley Campbell were the victim of a gamma, if that gamma were someone she and Emily Partridge both knew... or, hell, Partridge could have been inoculated at work, just as easily. If she had suffered some sort of devastating personal loss and failed to report it to H.R., as specified in her contract...

The computers are coming to life. Hafs takes the stairs down, not ready to risk an elevator, and reaches out to riffle through Emily Partridge's personnel files. They spill open for Hafs. Including the familiar name of Emily's high school.

And the name of her listed next of kin. *In case of emergency, contact Ashley Campbell.*

"Oh, sweetie," Hafidha says, a pang of sorrow so sharp she feels the Bug stretch in luxury. "Oh, I'm so sorry, child."

Ashley had been a witch; had requested a green, pagan burial. Which meant it was very possible that that was Emily's religion as well, and that it might have a bearing on her mythology. *Harpy, damn it, I need you. And where are you, now?*

No. Hafida snaps her bracelet. She pauses at the bottom of the stairs.

SOMEONE HAS CUT THE VIDEO FEED FROM THE FARADAY CAGE, Leon types.

JUST ANOTHER DAY AT WORK, Hafs types back, and opens the heavy fire door.

The hall is silent. The lights burn grimly overhead. The guard who should be on duty at the end of the hall is missing, the desk empty. Hafidha wonders who was on shift today, and hopes whoever they were, they just ran.

She sidles down the hall, moving fast because she doesn't have a weapon. She can't clear rooms; she just has to cover the ground and get out of the line of fire as fast as possible. She has to assume that Partridge has a Taser, a gun. The Taser won't do much more that slow Hafidha down. Startle her. Sting her a little.

Bullets are no fun, even for a gamma.

The airlock door to the Burrow isn't locked. Somebody used an override key. Hafs glides it open and steps inside. She pauses behind the second door, also partially open, and listens.

"I'm not going to shoot you," Partridge says. "Because that would make a hole in the mesh. But I'm going to open the door and come inside, and I want you to know before I do that that I am armed."

Suze's voice answers, wary. "What happens then, Emily?"

"You need to be evacuated," says Partridge, sounding oh so reasonable. "Everyone has to leave the building."

Hafidha checks the seal on her gas mask.

"Okay," Suze says. "You're my guard."

"Right," says Partridge. "Just step back into the corner. Away from the door--"

Hafidha hears the pistol cocking. She doesn't wait another second. Suze is safe inside the burrow, safe for seconds more. Safe as long as the door stays closed.

She reaches out, wireless girl, and triggers the in-room pepper spray remotely, dosing everything outside of Suze's cage. She hears a scream, coughing. She kicks the door aside and charges in--

Right into the sights of Partridge's gun. Partridge stands, coughing, tears streaming down her face. Feet planted in a modified Weaver stance, hands braced on her gun. Barrel locked on Hafidha.

"You're the monster," Partridge says. "Doesn't the FBI do pepper spray training with its agents anymore?"

"Budget cuts," Hafidha says, voice muffled through the gas mask. "Stuff costs a mint. Look at what we've hit up the taxpayers for today alone."

"Get in the cage," Partridge says. She gestures with her head, not her pistol. More's the pity. And the room's big enough that Hafidha is at least twenty feet away. Advantage to the gun.

"Get in the cage?"

"You never should have gotten out of it. Monsters don't get better."

"I know about Ashley," Hafidha says. "I know somebody took her away from you."

"Don't--you!--dare."

"All right," Hafidha says. She takes a step closer to the door of the burrow. "See? I'm going. But the thing is, I think we're on the same side."

"Walk. Shut up."

"Somebody killed somebody I loved, too."

The gun levels. Partridge squints over the sights, her face glossy with tears and snot. "We are not the same."

"A car," Hafidha said. "A freak accident. Nobody to blame. It broke me, Emily." She waves around. "You know how long I spent in this room."

On the other side of the glass, Suze is watching. Waiting? Gauging. But what can she do from back there? And Partridge is still being very careful with that pistol. She backs away as Hafidha advances, keeping her space buffer.

Keeping control.

Hafidha is halfway to the Burrow's double door. She has her shoulder to Partridge now. She stops and turns to her. "I saw conspiracies everywhere. I couldn't accept that sometimes awful things just happen. I had to have a reason, and then I had to find the person behind it. The person who made me suffer, and make them pay."

The hair on Haf's neck prickles. The hair on her arms rises, as of its own accord. She doesn't dare look at Suze, look away from Partridge. *Suze wouldn't hurt me*.

But she could. She might. She's a monster, too. Or the habitat of a monster, anyway.

But even if she would, how could it happen here? How could Suze call lightning inside a building, when she herself is contained inside a Faraday cage?

"Do you want to know what the funny thing was, Emily?"

"No," Emily says, but the muzzle of the gun droops slightly. She relaxes her grip to wipe her nose on the back of one hand.

"I think you do," says Hafidha. "The funny thing is that I was right. Somebody did kill my friend. The same somebody who--"

"NO!" Emily yells, and in the moment Hafidha sees she's overplayed her hand, or maybe this was one of those games that no hand could have won for her. Maybe Brady could have done better. Reyes.

Maybe not.

Emily raises the pistol. Levels it. Hafidha takes a breath and braces herself to run forward into the bullet, to keep going, To trust her superhuman body to take the shot and carry her onto Partridge anyway.

She hopes it won't be a head shot.

"I'm not like you!" Emily screams. "Ashley takes care of me!" And the bullet is coming, Hafidha knows it's coming, she can already feel her skin trying to crawl out of its way--

The room fills with smoke. With the scent of seared flesh. Hafidha blinks; she's on her ass against the glass wall of the burrow, and the gas mask has been knocked askew. Her eyes burn from leftover pepper spray. She has a memory of brilliant light, of booming sound.

She can't find Emily. No, there she is, sprawled on the--

Oh.

Outlets across the room are smoking, scorched black. Spitting tiny tongues of flame. A sprinkler kicks on.

Hafidha looks away from what was Emily Partridge. She heaves herself to her feet. Her ears ring. The room spins. She should go try CPR.

She turns over her shoulder and looks at Suze.

Suze stands near the inside of the glass, one hand pressed against it. The fine lines of the Faraday cage wires gleam golden against her palm.

"You could do that all along?" Hafidha asks stupidly. Her voice sounds tiny and distant.

"It's just an ionized pathway," Suze says. "It never had to run through me."

"Oh," says Hafidha. "You could have said something."

Suze smiles. It's not a happy one. "You were all very proud of your Faraday cage."

Act V

Ashton, VA, May 21, 2014

Tyler picks up on the first ring, jovial. "You're late for bike polo, man, we already started. Where are you?"

"Tyler," Dyson says, and jams the Nokia against his ear a little harder. "Tyler, I--"

"Wait," Tyler says. "No, not you, Dice, them. You sound...are you okay?"

The laughter and conversation on Tyler's end fades, gets farther away. Dice can hear the sea in his other ear, a roaring. "I'm sorry I'm late," Dyson says, and the sob breaks out of his throat. Sharp edges of gravel stab into his knees as he lands on them. The ambulance blanket falls away; the wind crawls up his back.

"Dice, it's okay," Tyler says. "I'm walking away from everyone. Signal's good. I can wait. Something happened. Are you still in Virginia?"

Dice lives in Arlington, but to Tyler and him, Virginia means Idlewood.

"Eddie..."

"Oh, fuck," Tyler says. "Dice, I am so sorry."

Dice, it's okay.

It's okay, big brother.

But Dice can't stop crying now that it's all come out.

"He'll come around. You said he was changing. I believe that."

Oh. "No. Tyler. He's dead."

"Holy shit."

If only Eddie was just mad at him. "He's-- He died. I just told him, and then--" And then Hell rose up. "He died, to save my life. I'm alive and he's dead."

Tyler doesn't need to hear about what Natalie did. How brave she was. Not today. Not yet.

"What the hell happened out there. No, later. Are you okay? Are they taking you to the hospital?"

"Maybe. I...kinda feel weird."

"It's shock. You should tell someone there. There's an ambulance, right?"

There were four. And something that looked like a SWAT team. "Yeah. I--"

"Tell someone."

"Tyler..."

"I'm here."

"I don't wanna be alone," Dice says, and the wind wraps around his throat.

"I'm coming," Tyler says. "I'll be there."

*

Brady sits down next to Hafidha on the bench beside the rose garden. It creaks under his weight. They lean together in companionable silence for a few moments, watching as Falkner and Tan direct the rescue and recovery teams. Lau was last seen bringing Susanna a cup of tea and a phone so she could call her mother.

Brady tilts his head after a while and says, "If I were knitting gloves for Henry Clark, I'd close off the fingertips. Just saying."

Hafidha shrugs. "He likes to feel the warmth of the coffee cup. He's got mittens that go over them when he's cold. You complaining?"

Brady made a noise that might have been a laugh before it died. "Not today."

The silence resumes. Hafidha looks around, and doesn't see Chaz. She had given him three big hugs and sent him off to talk to Suze. She doesn't have the

energy just now to deal with him.

Todd, though. Todd sounds restful. He wanders past, and Hafidha raises a hand to wave him over.

"Want a Creme Egg? Only slightly past the expiration date."

"They expire?" Todd accepts the candy. He holds the brightly wrapped oval in his hand as if it were an offering.

Brady settles and resettles himself, like he can't get comfortable. "Did anybody find Beale?"

Todd licks his lips. "Leon said he signed out a few minutes before the lights went out. Like he knew it was coming."

"Wait," Brady says. "What the hell?"

"It's him," Sol says. "That son of a bitch. It's him. Rupert Motherfucking Beale."

Hafidha feels a little dizzy. She stuffs a Creme Egg in her own mouth and bites it in half. Emily Partridge's last act of charity. "That's going to require some evidence, Duke."

Todd raises his hand, ticks off on fingers, some of which are partially missing. "He's close to the team, he's connected. He wrote a letter of recommendation for Jeff Simmons when Simmons applied to the FBI, thereby setting the stage for the Quantico outbreak. He once paid Guy Nadon as an informant--off the books, but I managed to trace a postal money order. He had a book signing in Portland around the time Viv Paliotto was killed. No credit card trace for plane tickets because his publisher footed the bill, but I got Homeland Security to pull the passenger records. Hope Mitchell met him at a book signing. I can place him in Leesburg for at least three hours before Ashley Campbell's accident."

"Circumstantial," Brady says, but not like he believes that means anything.

Todd nods. "And the kicker? He made a six-dollar purchase at a Starbucks less than two hundred meters from the intersection where Erik Holt was killed, not five minutes before."

"Fucking Starbucks," Hafidha says, feeling as if the earth under her feet has just dropped a meter and then caught her hard when she followed. "You know how many calories are in one of those things? And he's always drinking them. Always."

"Might keep even a gamma stocky, if he was crafty," Brady said.

"He's crafty," says Sol. "You know how he left the Chicago P.D.?"

"Medical," Brady says. "Line of duty, right? Other than that--" He shakes his head. Hafidha is already looking it up.

"Car accident," she says. "During a car chase. His partner was killed."

"Freak accident," Sol says. "So there's your gremlin. What if he can just... nudge probability? Get the result he wants when he wants it? Or get a better chance of it, anyway? He pushed you, and he pushed Emily Partridge. He made it happen, Hafidha. But that's not all."

Hafidha looks at the remaining half of the Creme Egg. It tastes, suddenly, like chalk and stale sugar. "Life is too short to eat crap chocolate," she says, and tosses it over her shoulder into the rosebushes. "Hit me."

Todd rubs his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Correlation is not causation. But I can put him on a bunch of plane flights that coincide with some of our ligature deaths. And I can put him in New Richmond, Wisconsin, of all the godforsaken places. Or at least, driving through it, because he had a signing tour eight years ago where he drove himself from Madison to St. Paul."

"Autumn," Brady says. "You're saying he taught that creep--"

"I'm saying it's possible."

"Holy balls," Brady says, and falls silent, staring. Hafidha realizes she's not worried, and that reminds her to reset the bugzapper. Which reminds her of Jason Saito's surprise and delight.

You're dead now, she thinks. *Shut up.* But when did Saito ever listen to anybody?

"I think he was hunting gammas all over the country. He's the thing that eats *T. rexes*. Rupert Beale."

Todd turns around and sits on the bench on the other side of Hafidha. He rests his elbows on his knees and tilts his head back to stare up at the flawless sky. All around them, the sultry scent of roses hangs on the late spring air.

"I do not have enough ammunition for this," Hafidha says, and looks at the blood on a dead woman's green shoes.

TV

[editor's note: this story is not in the reading order, but is linked in "Asylum."]

Arlington, VA, January 2014

Chaz Villette shook the rain--snow--whatever the hell the concrete-colored sky was flinging down on the greater metro area--off his jacket and his climbing bag and left them to drip the rest of it on the tile floor of the condo's front entry. He could hear music from the living room, a song he didn't recognize and which didn't sound like anything Hafs would play.

She was home, though; her big sapphire-blue coat that swung like a swashbuckler's cape was on its hook. Maybe she had company. But company would have a coat, too, and would leave it here, and there was no sign of strange outerwear.

Other people just walk in their front doors, he reflected. *Maybe even yell, "I'm home!"* Neither he nor Hafidha were other people. Nor was anyone they worked with. So he knew where his weapons were (gun in holster, mirror folded in his head) when he rounded the corner into the living room.

Hafidha sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the flat-screen TV, a gallon plastic container of homemade chocolate-cherry-granola cookies corralled by her thighs and calves. On screen, three girls in leotards and toe shoes *pliéd* and sniped at each other in...British accents?

On the surface, at least, nothing to be worried about. Chaz let his shoulders drop a little. "What happened to the guy in the moldy two-hundred-year-old overcoat?" he asked.

"I'm time-shifting *Sleepy Hollow,*" Hafidha replied around a mouthful of chewy cookie. "This is homework."

"Homework. Gamma ballerinas?" He plopped down beside her and stole a cookie.

"Not *work* homework. Not office work, I mean. This is one of Susanna Greenwood's favorite shows."

Susanna Greenwood was one of Idlewood's youngest inmates. Hafidha was mentoring her through the process of getting and using the implant. The bugzapper.

"Ah. It didn't seem like a you thing."

"I'll have you know I took ballet for seven freaking years, baby bro. I can balance on the ball of one foot with the best of 'em."

The TV showed two young guys doing a step-pivot, step-pivot, leap sequence that made his whole lower body ache in sympathy. "Is it...Australian?"

"Yep. And unlike the Disney Channel equivalent, it's full of teenagers who are butt-stupid in actual teenager ways, rather than made-up let-us-teach-you-this-lesson ways. Ooh, hang on. This is one of Kat's hip-hop routines." Hafidha waved the volume up, and they watched the dancers turn themselves into fierce, angular, graceful geometry.

"And you know the character's names," Chaz said when the dance ended.

"Teenagers think you're stupid if you don't know as much as they do."

"Uh-huh."

Hafs slugged him in the arm, then passed him the tub of cookies.

The end credits began to roll. "The way the show came up... Susanna said she had a quiet freakout when one of the characters got injured. She said it scared the crap out of her--that in a matter of seconds, someone could go from having a plan and a life and a shiny future to zip, game over, out of quarters.

"And I could see it was horror-movie stuff to her. That was when I realized the thing she was terrified of had already happened to me. Twice."

She bit into another cookie while Netflix settled on its home page for the show. *Dance Academy.* "So you told her it wasn't that bad?"

"Hell, no. I told her she was right. I told her what doesn't kill us mostly leaves us seriously fucked up, or words to that effect. When a life-wrecking event happens, *it wrecks your life*. And you have to try to get a new one, which is a lot harder than replacing a wrecked pretty much anything else."

Chaz contemplated the piles of wreckage on his own backtrail. But he'd been able to stick with his old life after all. The Relative had broken him, but he'd put himself back together and returned to his work and his friends and his future. "Boy, you sure do know how to give a pep talk."

"I do, though. It made her feel better."

"Seriously?"

Hafidha tossed her head--the braids that would have been flipped off her cheek were gone, but the gesture remained. "If I were standing at the top of a cliff with one of your pretty rectangular parachutes and said I was scared to jump, what would you tell me?"

"I'd say if you weren't you'd be an idiot. Oh."

"When you're scared, and reasonably scared, and somebody tells you, 'It's no

big deal," you know they're a liar. And being lied to is never comforting." She tucked her feet under her and stood up. "Jammers do not live by cookies alone."

"Who are you, and what have you done with my Wabbit?"

She frowned down at him. "Pffft. We need a pile of grilled cheese sandwiches. And maybe some beer. After that, wanna watch the next episode with me? It's only half an hour."

Teenagers being stupid. And, based on that step-pivot-leap bit, trying to defy gravity on a daily basis.

As an athlete, he could respect that. "I'll slice the bread."

Bear

Kentucky, April 2009

Q: What do you call a man who looks like an offensive lineman and has a big black beard and a mop of curly black hair? A: Bear. Q: What do you call a bear flying a Gulfstream? A: A pilot, you sapionormative jerk. Q: What do you call him as you're disembarking from the Gulfstream that he thinks of as his personal property?

"Well done, Special Agent," said Esther as her foot hit tarmac. Bear nodded and tried to conceal the shakes that were just now starting up. "What I want," she added, "is to find a way to call you unflappable without you turning it into a horrible pun."

"Not gonna happen," said Bear, pleased at how even his voice sounded. "So don't even try."

She was lying, of course. He knew that. What she really wanted was to get down on her knees and kiss the ground; but she wouldn't, so she kept it light, the way they all did after the fact. He knew about this, usually being the first one to see them after the fact. He referred to them as his payload, but only to himself.

"Where are we?" said Esther.

"Kentucky. Middlesboro Bell County Airport."

She looked around. "Are we trapped here forever?"

She still wasn't asking what she wanted to know; he answered what she asked. "There is almost certainly a way to reach civilization. Worst case, they airdrop supplies."

Two minutes before, Bear realized, she'd been thinking, *At least this happened while I was the only one on board.* Now that they were on the ground, she was thinking other things, but not saying them.

"Was it as hard as I think to land like that?"

"Not really," he said. "She makes a pretty good glider. The hard part was stopping in less than 4000 feet." In fact, they had pulled up so close to the end of the runway that the nose was extended over it. A few hundred pounds less fuel, and--don't think about it.

"What now?" she said.

"I make some calls and get us home. Then Julie turns into an obsessive-compulsive little shit who no one can stand to be around, and in two days she

tells us if it was sabotage, and if so, how it was done. And two days after that she grudgingly permits us to fly it again."

"And the FAA?"

"If she passes it, they will. They're all afraid of her."

Esther nodded, and finally asked the question. "What if it wasn't sabotage?"

"That's your department," said Bear.

Flashback

Washington, D.C., May 21, 2014

Stephen Reyes lowered the phone from his ear and tapped the red "disconnect" icon on the screen. That, so clearly, was how the action played in his head. So he was surprised to find he'd missed the icon and hit the margin of the screen instead.

His hand was shaking.

Autumn's school was on speed dial, or he couldn't have put the call through. "This is Stephen Reyes," he said to the front-office secretary. "I'm calling about my daughter." His own voice was a stranger's in his ears--too high, quavering, an old man's voice.

"I'll check, Mr. Reyes," said the secretary--what was his name? Tom. It was Tom. "Do you need to speak to her?"

"Yes. Yes, please."

Reyes listened to hold music and tried to breathe slowly. He should have counted verses of the tune, because that would reassure him he hadn't waited as long as it felt. Every beat was a step in the march to something horrible--

"Hello, *Papi*." She had a child's voice, made with a child's throat and tongue and lips. But the intonations and cadences were adult. He would know those four syllables anywhere.

"Hello, *mi ardilla*. Have you had a good day at school?"

He could hear her shrug. "Today in art class we learned about the color wheel. Science is still best, though. The tadpoles have legs now."

"Good for them. *Mija*, I'm going to pick you up after school today."

"I can take the bus. The driver knows me." An offense against her dignity, to take away this big-girl privilege.

"I know. And I know nothing frightens you, but I'm not as brave. Something happened today that scared me, and I'd feel better if I brought you home myself."

Over the phone, a considering silence. "Ooo-kay," she sighed at last.

"Wait for me in the office if I'm not there right away."

"Are you all right, *Papi*?"

He didn't lie to her. So he made sure it was true before he said, "Yes, I am."

When he disconnected, the phone was skittery in his sweating hands.

Rupert Beale. And, an inward scream, *You were my friend!*

No, he'd never been that. He'd been a tapeworm. He'd fed on the team's work, then on their lives. How long ago had the parasite attached himself? How much had he damaged or turned to his benefit?

Or arranged from the beginning to suit himself.

His team--now Falkner's team. Had Beale taken a furtive hand in their recruitment, tipped probability to select his opponents?

Not Chaz, because Reyes had found (and immediately failed) him before Beale could have first manifested the anomaly. Todd, likewise, had been on a collision course with the WTF long before Beale had heard of anomalous crimes. Falkner, Lau, Worth all filtered in from Down the Hall, from the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and the fixed determination required to get them there would have made Beale's intervention unlikely. Brady'd had his contact with Andre, but by Reyes's rough estimate, that would also have been too long ago for Beale to have manipulated the situation.

Hafidha.

Beale had got to her eventually, and through her, the team. Losing Hafidha had destabilized them. But could Beale have wanted her with them all along, a switch he could flip?

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., December 2003

"Doctor Stephen Reyes?" said a female voice from the receiver of the phone on his desk. It wasn't so much a question as a verification of a result.

"Speaking."

"My name is Doctor Madeleine Frost. I am an oncologist at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore."

She spoke with precision, as if to a child or a non-native speaker. Reyes prevented his virtual hackles from rising with a practiced effort. "What can I do for you?"

"I've read your white paper for law enforcement, first responders, and medical professionals."

The adrenaline rush made him glad he was sitting down. An oncologist. Not a bizarre crime, then--might she have seen some clinical sign of the anomaly, some causal link? But doctors weren't immune from believing their next-door

neighbors were aliens. "I see," he replied cautiously.

"I doubt that." As if it were a statement of fact, and to be insulted by it would be unreasonable. "I am consulting on the case of a thirty-year-old woman of African-American descent with stage III Hodgkin's lymphoma." After a stately pause, Doctor Frost added, "Or perhaps I should say she *had*."

"She died, then."

"No, Doctor Reyes. She's cured."

"In remission."

"'Remission' is usually more accurate. In this case, I don't believe it is. The patient's tumors did not merely shrink but disappear. I examined the tissue from the second biopsy myself. It contained no viable Reed-Sternberg cells, and no inflammatory cells. I then viewed the results of her initial biopsy, and finally examined that biopsy sample myself. I was able to verify that the first tissue sample clearly displayed mixed-cellularity Hodgkin's lymphoma. The two biopsies might as well have been taken from two different patients."

Reyes waded as quickly as he could through Doctor Frost's medical terminology. "You're saying...her treatment was effective."

"She was one month into an ABVD chemotherapy regimen which was to have been eight months in length. I believe the cancer may have been destroyed by her own immune system."

Reyes was fairly sure that didn't happen. Not normally.

"Doctor Reyes, I understand from your white paper that your task force seeks out unusual individuals who have committed criminal acts. If so, this is outside your area of interest. But if I have read your paper correctly, *you* would be very interested indeed in locating such an individual under any circumstance."

"You're correct," he said at last. "Yes. Yes, I would."

"I'll start the process for clearing the release of her contact information to you."

*

Baltimore, MD, December 2003

The woman who walked in the door of the coffee shop was dressed for a colder winter than Maryland could offer. Her shoulders hunched high under a red wool bomber jacket with the collar turned up, and knitted legwarmers covered her legs above her knee-high lace-up boots. She'd tugged a bulky black watch cap down over her ears and almost to her eyebrows.

Reyes rose from his seat to catch her eye. "Ms. Gates?" he said as she approached.

"Yep. Doctor Reyes, I presume?"

He pulled out her chair. "The very same."

She grinned. "You learn that at Quantico?"

"At my mama's knee."

"Now there's a woman who thinks of the future. So. I've been up close and personal with a lot of people named Doctor in the last few months, but none of them from the FBI. Have I turned into a security risk?"

He heard the faint hard edge behind the flip words. "I don't know. Have you?"

It surprised her enough to make her think. She shrugged out of her jacket and pulled off her hat; a furious mass of black hair sprang up in its wake. It looked dry and harsh-textured. *From the chemo,* he guessed. With her outerwear off, he could see the line of her clavicle through her sweater, the sharp jut of her wrist bones, the tendons of her neck unpadded by fat.

"You know I was with the Secret Service?" she said. When he nodded, she went on. "One of the things my job was based on was the idea that the easier it is for someone to do something, the harder it is for them to keep from doing it."

Reyes turned it over in his head. "Do you believe that?"

"No. I don't think I do. People resist doing bad shit every day, when it would be just as easy--easier, even--to go ahead and do it. I think what we were really supposed to be doing was watching out for the people who would do bad shit no matter how hard it was." She ducked her head suddenly, which put her face out of view.

"You liked your job," Reyes said after a moment.

"You could say that."

The waiter stopped beside their table, and Gates lifted her chin again with a dazzling smile for him. "Hey, it's my new favorite person! I'd like a large cafe miel, a hot chocolate, and the lemon poppyseed cake."

"Don't hold back on my account," Reyes said mildly.

For an instant, Gates's eyes cut toward him, fully open. But she merely turned the smile on him. Reyes ordered Darjeeling.

"If I haven't made the Most Wanted list, what am I here for?" she asked when the waiter left.

"Originally, I wanted you to tell me about...well, about your experience of the last few months. But I think I'd like to tell you, instead. And if I get anything wrong, you can say so."

Her lower jaw slid forward, and Reyes saw her thoughts in her eyes: *Con artist. Charlatan. Nutjob.* "And if you get it right, you'll tell me all about how to nourish my inner thetan?"

"If I get it right, I'll give you what little information I have about your condition, and you can do anything you please with it."

"My condition is, I had cancer."

"And now you don't. And if that were all, it would be hard enough to explain. But that's *not* all, is it?" He saw from the angle of her body, the shuttering of her face, that she was about to stand up and walk out. So he hurried. "You've lost a lot of weight in a very short time. It's one of the symptoms of Hodgkin's, so you didn't wonder about it at first. But you're always hungry. Unless you take in what you would once have considered an unreasonable number of calories, you get weak and light-headed. And you can do things you couldn't do before. You have the grip strength to open any jar easily. You have the endurance to walk, climb, or run further than you ever could. Your reaction times are quicker."

He had to pause for breath, and thinking. At that inopportune moment the waiter arrived with their order. *I'm going to lose her. She's scared--confused--and I've made it worse. She'll walk away.*

Food landed in front of her--sweetened coffee, sweet cocoa, cake--and she stared at it, hands in her lap, as if she were reading a page of text.

"Anything else?" the waiter asked.

Gates lifted her eyes from her order to Reyes's face. And grinned, a little crookedly. "Not yet," she said to the waiter without looking away from Reyes.

He had underestimated Hafidha Gates.

So as soon as the waiter was out of hearing range, Reyes said, "There may be another manifestation of what's happened to you. Some small ability, some unusual skill you didn't have six months ago, or one you had before that you're now much better at with no apparent cause."

Gates wasn't grinning anymore. She swallowed half her hot chocolate, though it must have burned her mouth. "You could say that."

"I don't need to know about it if you don't--"

"Oh, no. We're reality-checking here, and I want to get maximum bang for my

buck. I can...get the most out of a computer. I can sort the Internet like a centrifuge. It's...hard to describe. It's as if I know where all the electrons are buried."

"And that's new?"

She nodded. "It's not just food. I crave *information*. It's as if, because I got blindsided by life, I want to prevent it sneaking up on me ever again."

Reyes's breath hitched. He hid it by fiddling with his tea. "We call that your mythology."

Gates stopped in the middle of cutting a chunk out of her slice of cake. "'We.'"

"I lead the Anomalous Crimes Task Force, working out of the Behavioral Analysis Unit. We investigate criminal activity involving individuals affected by what we're calling the anomaly, for want of a better term. It produces the kind of metabolic changes you've experienced. And...a variety of other effects as well."

"You think that's what I've got."

"I do."

She popped her fork into her mouth and chewed cake. She seemed undisturbed, but Reyes didn't believe it. She swallowed and said, "So, not just superhackers?"

He thought of Lawrence Hakes, and felt a psychosomatic twinge in his knee. "If the anomaly were sentient, which I don't believe, I'd say it has a great imagination."

Gates finished her cocoa and swallowed another lump of cake. "You're here to tell me I'm now a supervillain, and you've got your eye on me."

With great power comes great responsibility, Reyes thought. Did Gates read comics? In the Secret Service, she'd been ready to take a bullet for a stranger. She'd understand Peter Parker's mythology.

"No, Ms. Gates. I'm here to offer you a job."

He was astonished by his own words. *No, you're not. That's exactly why you came. You just hadn't seen it yet.*

Gates set her fork down, folded her hands on the table edge, and studied him. "From now on, you get to call me Hafidha."

In spite of the wording, it was an order.

*

Washington, D.C., May 21, 2014

There was no place for Beale in that history. Frost, secure in her basement and her work, was practically untouchable. And the person who'd affected Hafidha's trajectory, for good or ill, was Stephen Reyes.

He could breathe again. He could pick up his daughter from school. And he could do whatever it took to help bring down Rupert Beale.

Not a friend. But maybe The Kingpin.

The Kung Fu Master Is [In]

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., December 2011

Arthur Tan rubbed his eyes and sighed. He seemed to be doing a lot of rubbing his eyes and sighing these days, and this case was seventy-five percent of it.

When he opened those eyes again, though, Stephen Reyes from Down The Hall was standing by his desk.

"Troubles?" Reyes said.

Tan gestured to the piles of twenty-year-old, fusty-smelling paper on his desk. "So I've got this guy in his fifties. Looks good for the recent series near Duluth. But."

"But serial killers don't start at 50." Reyes propped a hip on the desk, brow wrinkling with interest.

Tan waved at the smelly papers. "And I've got some stuff in other parts of the upper midwest back in the 90s that looks like it could be a part of the same series. But somebody's in jail for those. And we have a confession."

Reyes pursed his lips, and took the photocopy Tan handed him. He studied it for a minute, then his eyes closed in concentration. Tan thought about what Celentano had muttered once when he thought nobody was listening, about Stephen Reyes being a God-damned necromancer.

Then Reyes huffed through his nose and put the paper down. "The confession's no good."

"You think?"

"I'll write you a report," he said. "So you've got a paper trail. But no, I don't think this guy's good for it."

"So you think the confession was forced?"

"Forcing a confession is nothing. I could force a confession out of him in an evening."

Tan felt the matter of fact statement like a belly punch. "You're not saying--"

Reyes raised his eyebrows and smiled gently. "No. What I'm saying is that people are suggestible. Getting someone to say what you want them to say--that's easy. Getting them to believe what you want them to believe, just as easy. So easy you can do it by accident. You will do it by accident. You almost can't avoid it. Getting them to tell you what really happened--that is

almost impossibly hard. Hey, do you think there's coffee?"

"Doc made a pot a while back, but it might be burnt. So how do you avoid suggesting, then?"

"Hang on, I'm going to get something to drink--no, wait, we'll do this first. What you do is try not to make up your mind in advance of the evidence. Keep your interviews open-ended. Your subjects can pick up what you want them to say from the questions you don't ask as easily as the questions you do. Special Agent, where are you going?"

Tan paused, half-risen from his chair. "I'm going to start a fresh pot...." He realized what had happened only as a slow grin dawned acros Reyes' face. "Wait. Since when do you drink coffee?"

Reyes tipped his head.

Tan sighed and sat back down. "Sometimes you're a little creepy."

"You think so? You should get Sol Todd to discourse on the notorious accuracy of eyewitness accounts."

"I thank my lucky stars you didn't go into advertising."

Reyes laughed. He tapped the paper on Tan's desk and made it rattle. "You got a miscarriage of justice here, Tan. What are you going to do about it?"

"Fix it," Tan said tiredly. "Just as soon as I get some coffee."

"Sit," Reyes told him. "I'll bring you one."

Only after the senior agent was gone did Tan realize that Reyes hadn't had to ask him how he took it.

Afterword

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., April 20, 2013

And that, for now, was that.

It wasn't over; the FBI would be involved in the work of building the prosecution's case, providing and consulting on evidence and offering context for the arguments. But the immediate, terrible consciousness of fragile human bodies at risk could be set aside for a while.

"Aside" was never very far. And "a while" was sometimes a matter of hours or minutes.

Esther Falkner stood in a streak of sunlight in what was a mere widening of a corridor, a nameless, functionless connecting link between areas with names and functions. It was out of the path of anyone who might have come looking for her in particular.

She closed her eyes and saw the light through her eyelids, through skin and blood. She imagined it traveling to the center of her body as if it could be carried on hemoglobin cells. *I grieve,* she thought. *I rejoice. I grieve.* Tonight she would go home to her husband and daughters. She could take a little time now to ache for those who would never go home again.

She heard heavy steps approaching on her right and opened her eyes.

"Esther," Victor Celentano said with a nod. He meant to walk past; she saw him change his mind and stop uncertainly beside her, just outside her band of sun. His suit was wrinkled, his collar limp, and his tie loosened, and she noted they were the same ones she'd seen him in on Thursday afternoon.

The local field office hadn't had to officially call in the BAU, but there'd been ways to help. Plenty of people in the building hadn't seen much of their own beds since the fifteenth.

"Victor. Just letting the spring unwind."

He took that to mean what she'd intended: he was welcome to stay. He shifted more of his weight into his heels, sighed, and scrubbed his face with his fingertips. "Time was we'd be doing that with a cigarette and a glass of scotch."

"At this time of the morning."

"We were a hardy bunch."

She raised one corner of her mouth. "Since those were the days before you were at Quantico, and when no way in hell would they have let a broad do my

job, what 'we' do you mean?"

Celentano snorted. "Yeah, well. And that last was the Bureau's loss. Any asshole who hasn't figured that out shouldn't get a government check."

The silence was companionable, but Falkner broke it anyway. "Will they push for the death penalty, do you think?"

"Somebody will. They may even get it."

"God, I hope not."

"Not our problem."

"Of course it's our problem. We'll help them make their case, won't we?"

Celentano thrust his head a little forward on his neck. She knew his body language; he was prepared to engage. "I grew up in the North End. You know that, right?"

"And I'm a Jew. But this isn't like deciding whether to root for the Patriots or the Redskins, and *you* know *that*."

"Emotionless isn't in our job description. Poker face, sure. But you can't separate what people feel and what they do. Terrorism is about doing maximum emotional damage. If this idiot gets more fire rained down on his head because he freaked out everyone who saw the news footage, that's pretty much what he asked for."

Falkner rolled the words around in her head. She knew the shape of the argument already. She also knew where the raveled end of it lay. "No, you can't separate what people feel and what they do. What he asked for was his big brother's approval. That's in the news footage, too, for anyone who knows where to look."

Celentano narrowed his eyes, as if squinting into the near future for her next attack. "It's called the Justice Department." But he said it as if he knew he was parrying with the foible.

"It's also called the Department of Homeland Security. I'm not sure there's any such thing as justice or security without knowledge. In this case, knowledge leads to compassion."

"I never thought you were the sentimental type."

"It's not sentiment at my pay grade. It's basic human physiology. We treat nineteen-year-olds as adults in the justice system. But the brain doesn't develop a reliable capacity to judge consequences until closer to twenty-five. If you suck at weighing consequences, what do you use to decide whether to rob a gas station, or plant bombs on a crowded street?"

Celentano gave a little snort, which under the circumstances could pass for a raised hand. "Oh, sure. Use behavioral science against me."

Falkner let both corners of her mouth twitch upward. "We *are* on the clock."

"And since when do you say things like 'suck at'?"

"Pernicious influence of two teenage daughters. Do you have kids, Vic?"

"Son in grad school, daughter in management in the private sector."

"You might not have seen the dynamic up close and personal, then." Intermittently over the past few days she'd felt the same spasm of sick, helpless fear she felt now. She set it aside, as she had every time before; but this time she gave voice to the thought that caused it. "If Bekk embraced some kind of fanaticism, some violent ideology... Deb might follow her into it. They're about the same distance apart in age."

Celentano did even more damage to the state of his suit by shoving his hands in his trouser pockets and crumpling the jacket between his ribs and his tight-pinched elbows. His closed lips worked, and Falkner suspected he was sucking on his dental work. "So you're saying they already put down the guy responsible."

"More that the guy in custody isn't exactly responsible." She drew a long breath of conditioned air, the smell of floor polish, the sunlight's heat. "Let's do what we do best. Let's get inside this kid's head."

He gave her a go-ahead nod, the same gesture he might make if they were briefing a police detective who'd brought them a case.

So she did what she would do in those circumstances. She curled her toes in her shoes to grip the floor, and pulled her spine a little straighter, feeling the strength of her body in a firm line from legs to hips to shoulders to level jaw. Daphne Worth had once referred to it as "raising aspect." She'd looked it up later and laughed.

"A teenage boy in college," she said. "He wants to fit in, he wants to be popular. He's a little fuzzy about who he wants to be when he grows up. He idolizes his older brother, who's seen more of the world, and who has a cause, an identity, a set of goals.

"When the older brother recruits him to work for that cause, he feels accepted. Grown up. Worthy. His brother is taking him seriously. He's not thinking about killing. He's thinking about his brother's approval.

"The explosions are frightening, but exhilarating, too. He's accomplished something big. He's proved he deserved his brother's confidence. This cause that he's never really been a part of has been the means of proving his

manhood to his brother and the world.

"But the shootout with the police is not about the cause. Everything he knows about guns comes from TV and movies. His brother is shot. He's shot. Glass from the windows of the SUV is flying everywhere. He can't hear anything except the gunfire. His brother falls.

"His brother, who was the reason and the reward, *falls*. And he's just a teenage boy who doesn't know what to do anymore.

"He feels the thump as the tires of the SUV run over his brother's body. He's too deafened by gunfire to hear it dragging from the undercarriage. When it finally pulls free, he sees it in the rear-view mirror.

"From that moment, he ceased to be a threat. When he was taken, he wasn't even carrying a weapon. The weapons were his brother's, just like the cause and the plan. Without his brother, he reverted to the college kid his friends described, who would never do a thing like that."

She let out the rest of her breath slowly. It was like an exorcism. She could stop imagining her daughters in those roles because she'd invoked and released the real actors.

"The way you describe it," Celentano said, his voice rusty, "we could never do anything worse to that kid than he's already done to himself."

But that's not what the trial and the sentence are for, are they? she wanted to say. She'd harrowed Celentano's sensibilities enough for one day, however. "Go home, Vic. We get to start all over again tomorrow morning."

Celentano nodded and continued down the hall to wherever he was going. She pulled out her phone to call Ben. By the time she reached home, there'd be lunch.

Gross

[editor's note: This is not in the reading order, but is linked in "Something's Gotta Eat T. Rexes." Normally I would put it after the linking story, but here I thought it better to let the series finale stand as a true finale. If you want to read the excerpt in order, come here after Todd says "Hope I didn't ruin your evening?"]

Once a traveling magician came to town. He decided to do the "colored sands" effect. Now, this trick involves secreting colored sand about your person, and, it turns out, one of the best ways to do this involves filling condoms with the colored sand. He therefore went out to a pharmacy and purchased a gross of condoms.

He spent the evening in his hotel room filling condoms with colored sand. He discovered that the gross was, in fact, three short. While he didn't need all 144 for the trick, it was still a little annoying.

His show went well. After it was over, he returned to the pharmacy and said, "That gross of condoms you sold me yesterday was three short."

"Sorry," said pharmacist, handing him three more. "I hope I didn't ruin your evening."

Bunny

[editor's note: same as above, this is linked in "Something's Gotta Eat T. Rexes," and normally I would place it after, but a finale's a finale. Significant spoiler warning, though; I suggest that you skip for now and return later.]

You are in a dark damp passageway. A tunnel ahead leads to a DVD extra, which may contains *[sic]* spoilers for this episode, or a grue. The crawlspace behind you leads to safety.

>go to "Bunny"

>go back

"Hey, Steve."

The voice was familiar. It wasn't one that had ever before called him "Steve."

"Hey," Reyes said. "How are you?"

"Good." A strained laugh. "Well. As good as I could be. Warm and fed and usefully employed. Lonely. Sad."

"Me too," said Reyes. "You saw Duke's book hit the *Times* list?"

"I saw he finally got his Pulitzer."

Posthumously. His sister Sal had collected it for him, and given a thoroughly moving speech. Eloquence was not a limited resource in that family.

"Better," Reyes said, settling back into his chair. Autumn was on the carpet, building something improbable with her space Legos. He felt a knot ease inside. "Nikki's got a boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?!"

"Nice guy. Two kids. Hikes. They seem to get on. Danny's back at work as a civilian consultant. He and Gray tied the knot."

"In Rhode Island?"

"I baked them a cake. Your recipe."

"Good." The familiar voice caught. Snagged on gratitude or grief. Both. Other things too. "Good, that's good."

"Nikki says the job is easier now."

A sigh. "That's why I did it."

"Casey says so too. Suddenly, all sorts of people are coming forward. Most of it's nonsense. Some is useful."

"How's Dice?"

"Not bad. Night school. Suze is doing well too."

Another sigh. "Thank you."

"I knew you wouldn't ask."

A long hesitation, and then: "Nikki's not mad, is she?"

Reyes laughed softly into the phone. "Not that we talked about this, of course--but if we had, I'm confident she would have told me to tell you to stay safe, stay hid, be a smart, quick bunny, and if you ever need anything, you

know where your old friends live."

"Did you just say... 'smart, quick bunny'?"

"Well, that's what *she* would have said. I'm pretty sure of it."

"Yeah," said the soft voice on the other end of the phone. "Me too. I'm pretty sure of that too."

4.13 "Something's Gotta Eat T. Rexes" - by Elizabeth Bear, Steven Brust, and Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

This, too, is probable, according to that saying of Agathon: '"It is a part of probability that many improbable things will happen."'

--Aristotle, Poetics

Act I

In the end--or was it the beginning--it had been the reliably bizarre luck and the information-mining abilities of one Solomon Todd that gave them their break, or so he told himself at the time.

After everything started to go bad, after he really understood what they were up against, he was moved to consider if he had been played. Led. If some fraction of the horrors that followed were on his head.

But at the beginning, it seemed like a break.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building, Washington, D.C., July 1, 2014

"Beale must have been ready for a long time," Todd said.

Daniel Brady set a cup of coffee by Todd's left hand. Hafidha Gates sprawled across the couch on the other side of the bullpen, a tablet resting on her chest face-down in a strictly decorative capacity.

Renee's couch, Todd thought, with a tiny stab of guilt. If only they'd figured it out sooner--

It was what it was. And they were doing everything they could.

It was dark outside the windows. City-dark, not real-dark. Not Oolitic, Indiana dark. But what was, this side of the middle of the north Atlantic?

Todd tried not to look at the clock in the lower corner of his monitor. He definitely wasn't registering that the hour was a single digit, and that digit wasn't a *one*.

"Yeah," Brady said. "He's vanished like a tapeworm up a stray dog's ass. You don't do that without a plan. Cash. Identities."

"He's been *baiting us*," Hafidha said, with a lip curl that might have been a snarl. "Since day one. Since fucking two thousand and seven. He's been enjoying the game, seeing how far he could stretch his luck. How much he could get away with it."

"Not just his luck," Todd said wearily. "*The laws of probability, so true in general, so fallacious in particular*. Edward Gibbons. Maybe he decided it was really unlikely we'd figure it out."

"That'd be a fucking subtle manifestation." Brady sipped his coffee, kicked the toe of one shiny loafer. His pants cuff broke just so; Todd wondered when Gray had started buying Brady's clothes. He wondered if Mehitabel was still awake. She wouldn't mind if he showed up on her doorstep, looking for a shoulder to sleep on.

"That'd be a fucking lot of grande mocha frappuccinos," Hafidha agreed. "But there's cop skills, too. They also play into it." She tapped the back of her tablet meaningfully. "All right, Solomon, share your wisdom. Where the hell do we look next?"

"At the beginning." They were all tired. Too tired. "Victimology and profile. If we understand where Beale came from, we'll know where he's going." He stood. "Tomorrow. When everybody's here. Go home."

"Sol--"

"*Home*," he said, and they both sighed and lurched to their feet, exactly as if he still had the standing to give anybody an order.

*

Esteban Santiago Miguel Domingo Reyes Fomosa y Ibarra stood in the doorway of his daughter's room and watched her sleep. It was just as poignant as all the Lifetime movies made it out to be, and he felt mildly embarrassed for experiencing the emotion in such stereotypical terms. The part of his brain that was always running check sums and analyses, meanwhile, chose that moment to be archly amused about both emotions.

You're a piece of work, Stephen Reyes.

His phone beeped in his pocket. He stepped hastily into the hall, one hand pressing it into his leg to muffle any more sounds.

It was from Sol. *10 A.M. Preliminary profile and victimology.*

It didn't say of whom.

It didn't have to.

*

Nikki Lau knew that wiping her palms on the fabric of her carefully- pressed trousers was a sign of weakness. She rummaged her aching brain for signs of strength and confidence, because her assembled team was watching her.

They were arranged around the briefing closet table doing a bang-up job of showing positive attitudes, but she knew the difference between show and the real thing. Rupert Beale. *Rupert Beale*, for God's sake, had blindsided them so thoroughly that *betrayal* wasn't even the right word.

She filled her lungs with stale, shared air. "We had to start with the assumption that any information about Beale we got directly from him could be tainted. As it turned out, there was hardly anything he concealed or lied about."

Esther Falkner nodded. "Which suggests he believes there's nothing in it we can use against him."

"He could be right," Brady offered, from the wall he held up with his broad shoulders.

"Normal humans are pretty bad at threat assessment." Arthur Tan tapped gently with the eraser end of his pencil on the file in front of him. "Gammas probably are, too, unless they're special that way. Beale's not hiding anything except his present location, which says he doesn't think anyone's smart enough to use what he's given away."

"I hate people like that," Hafidha said. She gazed bright-eyed at the photo of Beale on the screen behind Lau and coiled a corkscrew of her hair around her index finger. "Really. Fire of a thousand suns."

Flirty and *predator*, Lau thought, and had to swallow before she could go on. "So, Rupert Beale, born in 1965 in the Avondale neighborhood of Chicago. At the age of eight he was hospitalized for pneumonia, and remained in Cook County General for six weeks."

"Pretty serious case," Todd murmured. "Even in 1972 hospitals weren't big on extended stays."

"That may have been when his first exposure to the anomaly occurred." Lau thumbed the remote in her palm. Beale's book-jacket photo was replaced with a yellowish snapshot of a square-faced, red-haired man and a densely-

freckled boy. The man was beaming, a baseball in one hand, the boy's shoulder in the other. The boy glared into the camera.

"Charles John Dacovitz, a hospital orderly, shot his wife and son on the pediatric floor of County General, then killed himself. We haven't been able to determine if Beale had direct contact with Dacovitz, but he was almost certainly on that floor at the time of the shootings." Lau recited the facts with as much cool distance as she could.

"Is that one of the stories we got from Beale himself?" Tan asked.

Chaz, who'd been silent, attentive, and surprisingly un-twitchy thus far, curled his lip a little. "Oh, yeah. There's a television interview. He says, quote, 'That may have set me on the path to becoming who I am.'"

Tan turned to Chaz, distressed. "That was on purpose, wasn't it? The way he put it."

"He's having a great time," Hafidha agreed.

"When Beale was released from the hospital," Lau continued, because if she didn't she might not get another chance, "the doctors prescribed fresher air than he was likely to get in the city. His parents sent him to live with his uncle and aunt, Gene and Linda Krupe, who had a farm near Plainfield, Illinois, outside Chicago." She thumbed the remote again to bring up a newspaper photo from the 1960s of a school ice-cream social fund-raiser.

The location was the yard of a big, rambling farmhouse, built on a prosperous farm where the owners could afford the latest 1890s architectural touches: gables, dormers, an arched sleeping porch, turned railings and gingerbread, decorative shingles. The house was painted a sensible and thrifty white in the photo, like the big dairy barn and outbuildings showing behind it, and stood at the top of a long, gentle slope of green lawn shaded by mature maples.

"The Krupe cousins were grown up and moved out," Brady said, picking up for her. "Son in the Army, daughter married and moved to Indiana. Rupert was effectively the only child of a middle-aged farming couple until high school."

"He didn't go back to live with his parents?" Reyes asked.

"Ten months after he got out of the hospital, his mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Maybe the family thought it would be easier on him to stay on the farm and miss the fun."

Hafidha rocked back in her chair, and Brady caught it before it whacked him in the hip. "Please tell me Mister I'm-So-Clever had a miserable young adulthood."

Brady grinned down at her. As far as Lau could tell, it was the unconsidered smile, the one that didn't come with reservations about gamma-hood. "Sorry, Miss Thing. Good student, lettered in varsity wrestling and the swim team, popular with the ladies. His aunt and uncle seemed to think he was God's gift to the universe. After that, four years at Illinois State University majoring in criminology. Joined the Chicago police force--"

"You skipped one," said Chaz.

"Wait, I've got this." Hafidha stared into nearby unoccupied space. "And may I say the irony of combining Rupert Beale and a city named Normal is not lost on me."

"Old, old joke," Todd said, but he was smiling.

Hafs stuck her tongue out at him, then went on. "ISU campus police report. Frat-boy hazing incident in which one guy jumped from a roof and two more were supposed to catch him, and really, don't ask me how anyone could have thought that was going to work out well. One of the catchers was our boy Rupert. As any sane person would expect, there were injuries all 'round. Beale got a busted collarbone. The catchee got a concussion."

Brady glowered from Chaz to Hafidha. "So why's there no report with the *real* police?"

Chaz tipped his head back to meet Brady's frown. "Because schools used to cover up fraternity hazing abuses and get away with it."

"Jesus in a leisure suit."

"No argument there."

Lau took the temperature of the room again. Falkner, Reyes, and Todd seemed surprisingly calm and contained, given they'd had the most contact with Beale. No, that wasn't true: Chaz had met with him often at Idlewood in the context of the survivors' group. And Chaz, though he might not be twitchy, wasn't anything like calm. In his stillness Lau thought she could read something deep and cold and...formidable. *Hafidha and Daphne,* Lau realized. *That's why.*

Hafs and Danny were nearly symmetrical in their anger. They both tended to rise to a challenge with a lot of "Oh, yeah? Sez who?" anyway, and they were focusing a concentrated pissed-offedness on Rupert Beale.

For Tan, still New Kid, Beale was a gamma. Not *just* a gamma, because that was never true. But Beale was their quarry, their perp, not someone he'd shared bits of his life with. His presence reminded everyone else that this was their job.

Lau clicked the remote again to bring up the next photo: a scene of so much ruin it was hard to identify its component parts. Shattered concrete, twisted rebar, the back end of a gray SUV, and a police car logo scarred and folded on a crumpled door panel.

Into the stunned silence that followed, Todd said, "One person walked away from that: Rupert Beale. Well, dragged away. His left hip joint was effectively powdered.

"He and his partner were answering a suspicious vehicle call when the vehicle in question, an SUV with two men in it who'd just beaten and robbed a rival gang member, went out of control and punched through the third-floor apron of a parking structure. It landed on Beale's and his partner's squad."

"Improbable," Chaz breathed, with what sounded like respect.

"The accident ended Beale's career on the force. It may also have been the trigger for his conversion, and the basis of his mythology. He had a stake, as he saw it, in knowing when the unlikely would become likely, or could be *made* to be likely. He could see the potential Rube Goldberg machinery of causality. All he had to do was step in and adjust a ramp here, a spring there, to make the events happen."

"Speculation," Reyes said, his voice rusty. "But based on sound observation."

Todd beamed at him. "Thank you, Professor."

"So we have three locations where Beale experienced significant trauma," Falkner said, her level gaze on Lau. "Cook County Hospital, the ISU campus, and the parking structure. Do any of them look like a place Beale might go to ground?"

Chaz opened the file folder in front of him and spidered his brown fingers over the pile of paper inside. Like the laptop lying closed in front of Hafidha, the file was a polite fiction; everything in it was in his head. "The parking structure, no. The whole block was bulldozed and rebuilt two years ago, and the street turned into a pedestrian mall. It would take a lot of abstraction to identify it with the original accident."

"Even if you're crazier than a barrel of shithouse rats with the lid nailed down?" asked Brady.

Chaz blinked in appreciation, and Lau filed the Bradyism away for use elsewhere. "The hospital's trickier. So much has changed that it's not the same buildings, or even the same institution, really. But Beale's identification with it isn't necessarily institutional." He looked up from his files. "Though Dacovitz was a hospital employee, and one of his stressors was probably hospital management. I'd say the hospital's about fifty-fifty."

"And the campus?" Falkner asked.

"There's the similarity with the accident that triggered his conversion. Struck by falling object. The life-changing component doesn't seem to be there, but it's hard to tell without any real investigation at the time."

"No public statements from him about it?'

Brady shook his head. "Which is either significant or not."

"Victimology?" Falkner prompted.

Tan set his pencil down. "Victim, know thyself. Because in addition to anomalous criminals, which fits the pattern of a vigilante killer, Beale targets law enforcement. Or rather, specifically, us. Like the vigilante, he sees himself as doing our job. Unlike the vigilante, he's actively interfering with the WTF. He's saying, 'I'm better than you,' but if he believes that, why bother to hold us back?"

"We're his experiment." It was Reyes's voice, so they all knew where to look. But Lau couldn't remember hearing Reyes say anything in quite that way before.

"But he's not in the sciences," she said.

"He sees himself as a researcher. It's in his books, in his relationship with the ACTF, his involvement with the survivor group. He'll change one thing and see what happens. Because the more you know, the more you understand of what's probable and why."

"Rupert Beale thinks I'm his lab rat." Hafidha's eyes narrowed, and her fingernails *tack-tack-tack*ed on her closed laptop. "Wonder if he wants some bubonic plague?"

"Let's try to narrow down the geographic profile, then. And what's the status on Idlewood?" Falkner asked.

Lau shook her head. "They've kept a lid on information about the...the disturbance. So far, more or less. The families are cooperating. But how long that's going to last--"

"Call in favors," Falkner said, and looked at Chaz.

Act II

Chaz's iPhone was staring him down, and he wasn't winning. Still, he put the call off for as long as possible--two whole-grain bagels with almond butter and honey, five carrots, and a milkshake--before sighing, picking the damned thing up, and calling a number that was still near the top of his "recent" list.

It only rang once.

"Chazzie!" Tasha McAndrews said, delighted. "You up for Old Rag this weekend or do you have holiday plans?"

"Maybe neither," he said. Her voice eased the thing that tangled around his lungs, making it easier to breathe than it had been. "I need a super-duper huge favor, though."

"Name it."

"Hear it," he countered. "Look, your new senatecritter--"

"This is a work favor."

"After a fashion. She likes to try to stay on the right side of history."

"Inasmuch as one can, sure."

"Well, we've got some history on our six right now, closing from out of the sun. If you take my meaning."

She made a possibly noncommittal noise.

He continued, "Something's going to break soon. Break big, and break bad. And I think she--and possibly An Historic Personage to whom you once introduced me--would find it advantageous to get out in front."

"I'm doing *you* a favor?"

He smiled, and let it get into his voice. "Believe it. I'm going to offer information, but I'm going to ask for spin control. Want to go get lunch? This doesn't belong on a phone."

She said, "Sure. I'll text you," and signed off.

Chaz looked at Brady across the space between their desks and sighed. "We're still cops, right?"

"Technically, I suppose."

"Just checking."

Brady tossed him a blueberry Clif bar. "Thanks for letting me be Freamon."

Chaz had the opposite thing to an appetite, but he ate the Clif bar grimly. Between chews, he said, "We need to get ahead of Beale. Chasing after him isn't working."

Brady gave one of his big-dog sighs and leaned back in a chair that protested. "That's just it. Given everything I know about serial-killer psych, and given the amount of time and effort Beale has invested in us as victims--the lengths

he's gone to to bait us, to torment us, and to generally gloat while we chased his laser pointers like a pile of spastic cats and never once looked for the hand--now that we're on to him, I'm shocked he's managed to keep from doing what I'd expect."

"Gloating?"

"I'd expect the cocksucker to be baiting us. Ripper letters. Digging his grave with his tongue. How's he keeping tabs on us?"

"Or he's gloating somewhere we wouldn't think to look," Chaz said thoughtfully. Two more gritty bites of Clif bar met their doom while he mulled it over. "That would please him even more, wouldn't it?"

"Chaz," Brady said. When Chaz looked up, he saw Brady grinning at him--the manic, bright-eyed *I see what you did there* grin. "Villette. What's the name of that crackpot website Dice and Reyes and Todd keep tabs on?"

"Call Todd," Chaz said, bolting out of his chair on a spike of adrenaline. "I need to talk to Hafidha."

He didn't quite shoot through the door to her burrow. Her lifted finger and concentrated expression brought him up short. He hung on the doorframe left-handed, leaning in.

As soon as her finger dropped, he blurted, "Hafs, if he was using his gammability--"

"--betability?"

He flipped his hand to indicate the immediate irrelevance of munchkining Rupert Beale's powers on the sliding scale of *Who's driving this bus?* "Anomability. To get stuff without leaving a paper trail. Like, misdelivered Amazon packages of Kraft macaroni and cheese or whatever. Would that make anything in the system come up colors for you?"

She pursed her lips. "Odds ain't bad," she said. "I'll go spelunking."

"Experts call it caving," Chaz said, with a tight smile.

The wad of paper she heaved at him only missed because he caught it. It crumpled, dry and light, scratching his palm. "Out," she said. "Momma's working."

*

Hafidha paused just inside the door to the bullpen, breathing quickly, a little disheveled. "Guys," she said. "Something just came up all colors." She paused. "Something weird. A mail-order box of a gross of condoms went missing on Monday in Ohio. The tracking information is all woo-woo."

That's the technical term, Chaz thought, but did not say. The old joke stuck in his throat as he looked at Hafidha and thought of how different everything was.

"Yuck," said Lau. "God, I hope that isn't Beale."

"Could be a touring magician," Todd said. He looked around at the sea of blank faces. "'Hope I didn't ruin your evening?' No?"

"No," Falkner said. She didn't seem happy.

And *waves* of dismay seemed to radiate from Brady, so strong Chaz couldn't be sure if what he was feeling was the mirror or just garden-variety human empathy.

"It's Beale," Brady said. So upset he didn't swear. From the expressions on Falkner's and Todd's faces, they got it, too.

"Why would he want twelve dozen condoms?" Chaz asked.

"IEDs," Brady said. But Falkner started speaking at the same moment, and he let her take the lead.

"Pipe bombs," she explained. "You put the black powder in a rubber before putting it in the pipe. Then you don't have to worry about blowing yourself up if you don't wipe the threads down when you screw the caps on."

"What's he going to blow up?" Lau asked.

"Figure it out." Falkner turned on the ball of her foot and headed for her office. Once she was inside, door shut, Chaz saw her pick up the phone before she flipped the blinds down.

"Right," Todd said. "Brady, you and Chaz get on that. Hafidha, we get to find the condoms."

Chaz noticed that Todd was again giving orders, and still nobody seemed inclined to point out that he was a civilian now. In fact, Tan turned in his chair and asked, "What about me?"

"Keep working on the victimology," Lau said. "You've got the most distance from it." She sighed. "And I've got more phone calls to make."

*

Hafidha sat in her temple, heels drawn up so her legs rested crossed on her chair, fingers steepled before her mouth, eyes closed and face unseamed--a serene bodhisattva of the electronic age. Arthur Tan paused in the doorway to her temple, uncertain if he should enter or withdraw. But as he watched, her nostrils quivered and her eyes flickered open behind the pink plastic vintage

frames.

"Is that coffee, Artful?"

"And it's yours," he said. He set it in the Designated Zone, marked off by yellow-and-black striped tape atop a filing cabinet that held yarn, not paperwork. Far away from any of the room's more modern technology. He pulled a bakery bag from one coat pocket and set it beside the coffee cup.

Hafidha snatched it like a mongoose nailing a snake, without rising from her chair or even uncrossing her legs. She peered inside and cackled. "Sticky pecan buns. Arthur, you shouldn't have."

"Can't have you wasting away." He laid a wet-nap next to the coffee, too.

Behind and around her, the flash of data across a dozen monitors continued unabated. She ate the pastry daintily, reverentially, but without hesitation. She chewed with her eyes closed, and sipped creamy coffee between bites.

She was nearly done with the second pecan bun when one of the monitors ceased its nauseating flicker and stabilized on something that looked like a page from a database. Around it, one by one, other monitors ceased their scrolling and settled on similar information. Tan felt a flutter of excitement in his chest, as if he were watching a slot bar come up cherries.

Hafidha looked up at him and smiled.

"Jackpot," she said.

*

"Mislaid shipments," Hafidha said, standing in the briefing closet and looking not at the projection screen but at her team. She knew what the screen showed--screenshots with highlighted lines, each showing where a shipment of something or other had gone undelivered and been re-ordered. She didn't know what her team would show. And it was strange and comforting both to see Reyes in his habitual chair once more, back to the wall. "Here's a job lot of electronic eyes; and here's one of plumber's o-rings. Some black spray paint. Framing nails."

Everybody else traded glances. Everybody except Todd, who kept his gunmetal eyes very calmly, very placidly on Hafidha's gesturing hands. The rest of the team seemed nervous, high-strung. Ready to move. Todd turned his devil duckie key fob over and over in relaxed hands, the left one cupped to hide his missing fingers.

Lau tapped her fingertips together. Blunt nails, painted dusty pink. "Todd, did you want to report on the Conceal This! web-site?"

He gave her a deferring wave. Reyes made a face, and Hafidha winced in sympathy, thinking of Hope Mitchell, and one of Beale's more successful attempts to fuck up all their lives. Hope had been a big fan of the conspiracy newsletter in its print zine days, before she knocked some of Reyes's teeth out with a chisel and got herself strangled by the Thing That Eats *T. rexes*.

Lau took a breath and continued,. "So Todd and I did a little digging on the message boards, and we found a bunch of messages that conform to Beale's writing style, though they were stamped from various different users. They're all posted through anonymizers, because the bastard is clever. But Hafidha hacked the back end for us, and there's one private message from one of Beale's apparent sock puppets arranging a dead-drop transfer of some 'highly sensitive' information with another user at a location off the highway, not too far from Gary, Indiana."

Hafidha said, "Which leads me to my next point. The notable thing about the data I've been pulling regarding misdeliveries is that, while a lot of stuff gets lost in the mail, in the past six months all of the ones that tweaked my spidey-sense... have gone missing in the upper Midwest."

Brady fidgeted with his coffee cup. "He's using his anomalous ability to redirect shipments to his safe house."

"Why not just order them using fake identities?" asked Tan, then answered his own question. "Right. He's baiting us. He wants us to find him."

"And who are we to disappoint?" said Chaz, but there was unmistakable tension in his voice.

"I asked Chaz to play pattern-master with the addresses I got," Hafidha said. She waved at Chaz, who didn't stand.

"He's got to be attempting some kind of countermeasures," Chaz said. "But the thing is, if we assume that in the wake of...Idlewood...he's moved to an endgame, he's only trying to stall us long enough to get set up. He won't want to sit and wait forever. If he wanted to *vanish*, he'd just vanish, and we'd never find him again. He could live in the wind forever, with what he can do. Or at least as long as the anomaly leaves him a liver."

Reyes made a noise. Everybody looked at him, and he waved it away with a hand, but they kept looking. "It's not an endgame. Beale thinks he's smarter than we are. He thinks he's smarter than *the anomaly*. But the behaviors observed by the BAU in our interviews with killers--all the way back to Douglas and Ressler--are still controlling him. He involved himself in the investigation. He pushed closer and closer to the people most likely to catch him, because he was sure we *couldn't*. He can't vanish until he's beaten the people who know about him, and is sure we know he's won. And since Beale

thinks he can even beat the anomaly, he doesn't think he'll need an endgame. He thinks he'll live forever. Beating the odds is part of his mythology."

"Shit." Brady was looking at Reyes, shaking his head. "How are you even possible?"

"You've done okay without me," Reyes said.

Chaz looked at his hands. Hafidha held her breath. Everybody waited.

Chaz said, "The combination of the geographic profile and the offender profile suggests that he'll have gone home. He'll want familiar turf for his showdown."

"Chicago," Falkner said.

Chaz nodded. "Brady and Tan have a theory."

"He's still crazier than a barrel of shithouse rats." Brady looked around at the assembled faces, and offered an apologetic half-smile.

"That's not the theory," said Tan. "We've been looking at locations of previous trauma. But Beale values control, not chaos. His home base will be someplace where the odds *didn't* turn on him, where things always worked right."

Hafidha felt the lights go on, but it was Lau who spoke. "Uncle Gene and Aunt Linda. Captain of the wrestling team. The golden boy."

"He's at the farmhouse," said Brady.

"Great," Hafidha said. "Let's go set fire to it."

Chaz's head jerked up. "Hafs--"

"To flush him out, stoopid. Not to barbeque him."

"We can't." That was Reyes. Hafidha hadn't realized she could miss being annoyed by that tone of voice, but there it was; she'd missed it.

Brady snorted. "The hell we can't. Staties and the local field office will be all over it."

"Rupert Beale takes advantage of probability," Reyes said in his most clipped and professorial style.

"Which, with incendiary devices, makes a lousy cocktail," Todd sighed. He wiped his palms over his brow and what was left of his hair.

Tan cleared his throat. "Establish a perimeter and starve him out?"

"Crap. No, we can't," Hafidha said, which made everyone stare at her. But Reyes was nodding. She wanted to hit him for it, just a little. Instead, she said,

"Secure perimeter, heavily manned and lit up like daylight twenty-four-seven...until something goes freakily wrong with the generators, or we get a nice Midwestern tornado, or everyone comes down with a fucking norovirus."

"We have to go in after him." Chaz said it, because her baby brother didn't let other people do the heavy lifting.

Brady scowled and smacked the wall behind him with the flat of his hand. Hafidha pretended not to jump at the boom. "He knows we're coming. He *wants* us to come."

Lau clasped her hands tight in front of her and leaned forward over them. "If we lose him now, we probably lose him for good. Chaz is right. Reyes is right."

And what are the odds Beale knows that already? Hafidha thought. Since everyone else was thinking it, too, she kept quiet.

Esther Falkner put her hands on the wall she leaned against and pushed herself upright. "Get your things," she said to her team. "We're going to Illinois. Todd--"

"Todd is coming," Todd said, rising to his feet with the agility of a man twenty years younger. "I'm licensed as a private citizen to carry a firearm, Esther. And you need me."

She frowned at him for a moment while Hafidha's heart accelerated. Then Falkner sighed through her nose. "All right. Hafidha, you're with us."

Reyes stood. Falkner glowered at him. "Stephen, you have a little girl."

"I'm retired," he replied. He glanced at Todd and smiled. "And I'm no Solomon Todd."

Falkner let it slide."Tan... I'm sorry, but you get to mind the ranch this time."

"I warm benches better than anybody," he said. "Never fear."

Hafidha expected Falkner to raise an eyebrow and point out that anchor was a key role, and hardly benchwarming. But Falkner just shook her head, once, and headed for the door.

*

It was as quiet a flight as Falkner had ever endured. Her team huddled near the front of the Gulfstream, drinking coffee, pretending to read, and occasionally making desultory conversation. She was the commanding officer: she should do something to ease the tension.

But for the first time in her career, she couldn't think what.

At least it wasn't as bad as going after Hafidha had been. But that was cold comfort, and not something she could say out loud.

Finally, Hafidha looked up from her hands-free session of Angry Birds and barked laughter. When everyone turned to look at her, she shook her head and said, "You know the worst thing? The Bug was right. Somebody is out to get us, and has been all along."

Chaz stopped gnawing his thumbnail long enough to reply. "Even a stopped clock is right twice a day."

"Not if it's digital," Hafidha replied.

*

"Good flight, special agent.," said Esther, the first one down.

Bear kept his face straight. He was, to be sure, technically still a special agent; but even now, in the post-Hoover years, he couldn't get away with that beard, that hair, or with his bike leathers anywhere that involved contact with the public. Or even other agents, with the WTF being the notable exception. He used to do his best to look the part, before a .38 slug did things to his hip that he still couldn't think about. He was grateful for the employment, and more grateful that he could still walk; and calling him "special agent" had always been Esther's private joke.

Behind her, Villette said, "Tell me the truth: you've been gradually dropping the ceiling on this thing, haven't you? Just to see when we'd notice?"

"Don't piss off the bear," said Lau. "The Gulfstream is his weapon. He's liable to pick it up and throw it at you."

"Rar," agreed Bear. Then, "Go get the bad guys," he told Falkner.

"I always do," she said. "Take care of my glider."

"*My* glider," he said automatically as the others followed her down.

As his payload walked across the tarmac, he frowned. *Do they look more nervous than usual?* he wondered. He shrugged and returned to his post-flight checklist.

Act III

"Spooky," said Daniel Brady, since no one else had said it and everyone was thinking it.

The house was on top of a gently sloping piece of what had been Illinois farm country. The sensible white paint was peeling and gray; the porch rail sagged

and showed missing bits like a mouthful of bad teeth; the rooflines dipped like the backs of old horses. The big shady trees from the photo were gone, replaced by a windbreak row of poplars dying of neglect and age. The old lilacs and mock oranges and viburnum that had ornamented the foundation had gone feral and enclosed the place like a jungle.

The barn was still there, fallen into itself like a decayed rib cage, and the cockeyed shed they now crouched behind. But the rest of the farm was gone. Bulldozers were at work down the road on an office park. The scrub fields and softwood thickets that had been cultivated land ten years ago would go the same way soon.

It was a heavy-handed metaphor for something, but Brady didn't have time to argue with the set designer.

"Judging by appearances," said Lau, who never judged by appearances, "the biggest danger is having the damned thing collapse around our ears."

"I'm leading," said Falkner. "Then Brady, Gates, Todd. Villette, bring up the rear."

Brady, who had always been tail-end Charlie, didn't argue, couldn't argue, didn't have to like it.

"Assume he'll have eyes on us as soon as we step into the open," said Todd.

"He's no sniper," said Brady.

"And he'll want us in the house, where he has control," said Villette.

"How do we enter?" asked Lau.

Todd huddled over, did something Brady couldn't see on the ground, then announced, "Front door."

"The front door is exactly as safe, and unsafe, as any other," said Falkner. "Why?"

"My secret weapon," he said, holding up a twenty-sided die. "I numbered each door and window."

"Randomizer," said Villette. "He's playing with probabilities, so we play right back."

"Darn," said Hafidha. "I was hoping for *Call of Cthulu*."

Brady refrained from commenting on the fact that Todd had been carrying around a twenty-sided die.

Falkner looked like she wanted to say all sorts of things, but settled for, "Floor

plan?"

"Got it," said Hafidha. "Locked in."

"What would you think," said Brady, "of calling in an airstrike?" He didn't even get a courtesy laugh. He glanced over his shoulder: police cars, ambulances. Lined up by the roadside and waiting.

Waiting was all they would do, unless the team called for them. This was no job for the Regulars. But Brady thought longingly of screwed-up law enforcement sieges of the past, in which the forces of order opened fire through the windows, or threw in canisters of tear gas that set the building on fire. The job, done right, demanded that you didn't shoot first, and you took the bad guy alive if you could. Besides, tear gas cannisters and a hail of bullets might get awkward around a guy who fiddled with probability.

But damn, if there'd ever been a time for a Waco or a Chris Dorner in the cabin in Big Bear, this was it. He checked the straps on his ballistic vest, and made sure his backup weapon wouldn't hang up on the bottom edge or slide down and pinch.

"Tan?" Falkner asked.

"Loud and clear," Tan said in Brady's earpiece, and everyone else's. "There's no unusual activity on the monitoring sites Agent Gates set up. The recorder's on."

"Okay, move out," said Falkner.

Weapons out and down, they crossed the fifty feet to the front porch and stopped. The door had once had a window, but the glass was gone. Through the empty square Brady could make out a dark front hall. Flashlights came out without anyone saying a word. *Deep breath time*, thought Brady. Shouldn't the door have been boarded up? He narrowed his eyes to study the rotting frame, and saw-- "That's a Post-It note."

Falkner crouched at the foot of the steps, sighting across their warped surfaces. She did the same to the floorboards of the porch before she stepped on them and bent to read the note. The face she wore when she looked back at them over her shoulder had no expression at all. "It says, 'Welcome in.'"

Brady felt his pulse speed up. "Show-off," he said.

"Tan, this is Falkner. We're going in. Mark the time, please."

"Wait." Todd's voice had the sharp crack to it that always went straight to Brady's spine.

Falkner turned back. "What is it?"

Todd moved forward, staring at the door handle and the keyhole, then poking his head through the broken window. He took out a pair of pliers and some latex gloves. "Tell you what," he said. "How about if I lead?"

*

If Todd had thought about it, he would have considered it an odd kind of comfort. No one else, except maybe The Cowboy, would think of it as comfort: creeping along at about ten yards a minute, flashlight in one hand, service weapon in the other, eyes straining, looking for what the next death-trap might be, knowing there was one. But it *was* a comfort, because this, moving in on the target, team at his back, was what Solomon Todd was made for.

Right behind him, Falkner would be wondering if Beale had planted that first trap, the electrical charge on the doorknob, deliberately to warn them: "Traps ahead! See if you can find them all!" Maybe so, but that wasn't Todd's concern: his interest was in finding the next one, and nothing else. Hafidha and Chaz had memorized the layout of the house, and Falkner, Lau, and Brady were watching for Beale, which left Todd free to watch for--

There. He held up a hand and focused his light on a gap in the wainscotting. There was a matching gap opposite. Photoelectric, no doubt, rigged to a pipe bomb right...there, in the ceiling. "Duck," he said.

"There's another note," said Falkner. "End of the hall, too far away to read."

Did that mean Beale expected them to get past this one? Or was he trying to distract them?

"Disable it?" said Villette from his tail-end Charlie position.

"I would, but I'd be more likely to set it off trying."

Two of them back to back would be clever, thought Todd, and looked carefully at the next several feet of hallway. He found what might have been a pressure plate under a loose board, and guided them past it.

The note, in the hasty script of someone who wrote his first drafts longhand, read, *Nice save, Agent Todd.*

He shivered; he couldn't help it. He checked around and under the note carefully. Then he flicked it off the wall and handed it to Falkner. She frowned and stuffed it in her trouser pocket.

They inched up to a pair of doors, just before the hallway would open up into what Hafidha said was the living room. Todd spent a lot of time on each. The one on the right was rigged to go off when the door moved. "I don't see any way past that one," he said. "So we'll assume he isn't here."

"It's a bathroom," said Hafidha. "I doubt he'd wait there by choice."

Across from it was what had once been a sun parlor, but now was empty even of furniture. The windows were boarded up, and there were no traps.

"I'm glad he doesn't have an infinite supply," said Lau.

Todd grunted and led them back out of the room. A left turn. *Farther up and further in. Or do I have that backward again?*

"About due for another," he said. He was starting to get a sense of Beale's psychology. People had patterns. Gammas, even more so. And trap -makers, Todd had found, usually had an orderly sort of mind.

He shone the beam ahead and saw nothing, nothing--a shadow on the wall, just a wavering ghost, thin as a hair.

"Aren't you glad you brought me along?" he said, crouching down to show them the matte-black trip wire. It pleased Todd to be doing something useful with Uncle Sam's poisonous legacy. "I do my best work in the dark."

He glanced up, thinking, *I bet I'm pissing Rupert off something fierce right about now.* His flashlight picked up a glint of metal just before he saw the muzzle flash; the report, horribly loud in the confined space, seemed to come a long time later.

*

Arthur Tan had heard "to do is to be" at least as often as anyone else who'd either been to college or knew someone who had, but he'd never before considered the negative.

Words came through the crackle of static; most of them Tan recognized--barely--as Todd's voice. "Clear," he would say, then there'd be a pause. Then, "Stop, got one." Then, "Stay to this side," or, "Stay low," or, "I can get this one." Those phrases and words, in Todd's voice, going from crisp, no-nonsense urgency to what Tan couldn't help but think of as a Northern Drawl.

Sweat was running down the back of Tan's shirt. *Christ, they're calmer than I am,*. Then, *Of course they are. If I were there, I'd be calmer.*

He tried to fill in the empty time by doing--making sure the logs were up to date, that the recording gear was working. It didn't help. The trouble with being on the bench wasn't the bench, it was the being.

The sound was like a burst of white noise, of infinite volume and precious little duration. It took him almost a second to identify it.

*

Falkner saw everything. *That's what agents do,* said a detached part of the detached part of her mind. *We see things, and we remember what we see, and then we report it.*

The gun was a big one, a .50 cal Desert Eagle 1911 GR, magazine holds eight rounds plus one in the pipe. The hands gripping it had stubby fingers and poorly manicured nails, and the cuff of the shirt in the unwavering flashlight beam--that had to be from Lau--seemed purple.

She kept seeing. She kept seeing everything. She brought her own weapon up at so close to the same time Todd did that for an instant there was the illusion that her arm was raising both weapons.

The muzzle flash was brighter than the flashlight, and faster than the raising arms, because Beale had been waiting, and because her speed, and Todd's were only human, after all.

Hafidha's was not. Falkner, who saw everything, didn't see Hafidha move, just saw her appear, between the gun and Todd.

The muzzle flashed only once, then gun, hands, and shirt cuff were all gone, and Hafidha was knocked backward into Sol, who caught her with his flashlight arm as he kept his service weapon raised. Someone cried out, "Hafs!" and it took Falkner a while to realize it was her.

Nikki Lau's flashlight beam, now joined by Brady's, never wavered.

Falkner stepped up next to Sol, noticing that her light was also steady. There was an impossible tension, watching, moving only what was absolutely necessary, and the echo of the shot died out; it had seemed to have lasted for a long time. And then there came the smell of cordite, harsh and sick-making and meaning so many different things in so many different times and places.

"Hafs!" said Chaz. "What--"

"Literalizing the metaphor," she said, and coughed.

"Hafs!"

"It'll take more than one little old bullet to kill a big tough gamma," said Hafidha.

Too fast and too slow, thought Falkner. *That's how it always happens. No time to act, but plenty of time to watch it all happen, every detail*. She wanted to know how seriously Hafidha was hurt, wanted to know so badly it made her teeth ache, but she didn't dare look away. She had a job to do. Two jobs--make sure Beale didn't get another shot at them, and watch everything, so she could remember it, and report, because that's what FBI agents did.

"Tan," she said. "Agent down."

*

Todd got all of half a step past Hafidha before Falkner's voice, with a crisp, flat, "No one moves," stopped him as effectively as a stone wall would have. Beale was up there, and had just shot Hafidha. Beale had aimed at him, but she--

"There are still traps," said Falkner, her voice level.

Todd risked a glance back. Lau was holding her flashlight, her service weapon in the other hand, both hands together; perfect form, just like she'd been trained. Her face was as expressionless as it always was when she needed to do the impossible. Brady and Chaz were on their knees with Hafidha, Brady keeping pressure on a wound in her armpit, over the edge of her vest. Where so damned many cops and soldiers got it. Blood ran black over Brady's hands.

Bloody luck. No, not luck; probabilities. He made a grunting sound and turned toward the darkness where Beale had disappeared.

"Todd!" said Falkner.

He nodded and turned back, next to Falkner, watching, waiting, holding. *Do your job, you stupid nit. Trust your team, and do your job. Anything else will make things worse*.

On the doorframe through which the gun had appeared, he saw a sticky note. *RIP Solomon Todd.*

That chicken hasn't hatched yet. He felt a dull, savage satisfaction over it.

*

Chaz's knees ached. His teeth hurt from clenching. He was frozen in place, locked, feeling panic rise up as he hadn't since--since Texas. *I can't do this. I can't do this again.*

A touch on his sleeve. Todd, gentle. Chaz shook him off, still not looking away from Hafidha. Her eyes closed, she breathed through gritted teeth.

"Hurts," she said.

"No shit," said Todd. "Chaz, stand up. Cover us."

"I wish Daphne were here."

Had he said that? Said that out loud? What a stupid thing to say out loud.

"Me too," Hafs said.

"Hafs, don't talk--" Behind him, Chaz could hear Nikki's voice. Calm, level.

Talking to Tan, telling him to get EMS to the door they'd come in by. Not to let them enter the building. *Too close*, Chaz thought, but he didn't say it.

Todd touched his shoulder again. Chaz gave Hafidha's hand one last squeeze, passed it to Todd. Stood. Brady was breathing hard with the force he was putting on the wound. Chaz heard cloth ripping on the blade of a knife; Todd making a pressure bandage out of his nylon jacket.

So Hafs could be moved, of course.

They had to take her out. With the traps, no one could come in.

"Hey, Wabbit," Chaz said. "We're gonna get you out of here."

"No. Go get him," Hafs said.

"She's right," said Falkner, in a voice with dark water under rotten ice flowing through it. "We'll never catch up with him again."

"Lau," said Chaz, with someone else's tongue. His words sounded thick and far away. "Nikki. Get her out of here? For me? I need to know--"

"If you'd rather do--"

"No." Chaz didn't close his eyes, because he was scanning the darkness ahead. Reaching out with the mirror. Waiting for the ripple of reflection that would reveal Beale's presence. "I have to stay here."

He couldn't look at Nikki, either. But he trusted that she understood, that he had to stay and so he was trusting her with the thing he loved best. Because he did trust her.

He heard her clear her throat, start to speak. Stop herself. She started again. "Go get 'em, tiger."

But with the mirror stretched out with such tender sensitivity, he heard what she had swallowed, anyway. "*You're* the thing that eats T. rexes." is what she would have said.

"I'll go," Brady said. Trusting them to take care of themselves.

"No. I'll take her," Lau said.

Brady shook his head. "Me. You can't carry--"

"Please," Lau said. "What is she, a buck twelve? I'll be fine."

Chaz knew, of course. He always knew how heavy things were. It was part of being a monster. "One twenty-three with gear. Sorry."

He didn't see, but he knew from her voice that Lau rolled her eyes. "I deadlift

two ten."

"Fine," Falkner said, ending the argument. "Just do it. Remember that the traps are still armed. And if either of you drops your vest to lighten the load, I'll skin you both before breakfast tomorrow."

"You hear that, Hafs?" Todd said. "We'll come see you tomorrow. You better be there."

"Nng... Make it worth my while?"

A forced smile in Duke's voice. Now Chaz's eyes ached, too. Duke said, "I'll tell you the Argentine racehorse story. For reals."

"Nah." There was a rustle: she must be squeezing Todd's hand. "Tell me about the fingers."

Todd huffed. "But you already know that, don't you?"

"What makes you think I'd look?" Her voice was stronger. Chaz's heart kicked him in the ribs. She was a gamma, after all. Todd and Brady were getting Hafidha to her feet, Lau moving into position to support her.

"I know you."

Hafidha said, "Evidence is not the same as a confession."

"Eyewitness testimony isn't worth a damned thing."

She coughed, pushed Brady back, and Chaz had to steal a glance as she leaned hard on Nikki and Nikki held her up, no problem. "Right. Go shoot someone for me."

She looked at Chaz. Chaz looked at her. Either one of them could have said something.

Neither one needed to.

And then Hafidha and Nikki were turning away, staggering, back the way they'd come.

*

Me and my big mouth, Lau thought--through the long black corridors, through the empty nightmare halls. *Me and my big mouth.* And, *I don't quit when I'm tired. I quit when I'm done.*

She should have had other mantras too, but she frankly couldn't remember them.

Hafidha stayed conscious, which made it possible. Oh, Lau would have gotten

her out anyway--but she would have hurt her worse doing it, whether she had to resort to the fireman's carry or the less-widely-known but equally valid fireman's drag. And she probably would have dragged her right into a trip wire or an electric eye or something, and that would have been that: *So sorry for your loss, Mrs. Lau.*

Hafidha--staggering, stumbling, dripping blood through the pressure bandage--remembered where the traps were. And between the two of them, like a pair of mismatched Persephones, they came out of Rupert Beale's own underworld into the blue-and-white-and-red-lit night blinking, dragging their feet, so covered in blood that the paramedics who met them at the door at first didn't know which of them to put on the stretcher.

They shouldn't have let Lau ride in the back. That they did proved to Lau, as much as anything, how bad it was. But she sat there, crammed into a forward corner, and held Hafidha's hand. It was cold, so cold, even for a jammer. Lau didn't want to know how much of her blood was spread over the floor of the farmhouse outside Chicago.

She thought Hafidha had relaxed into sleep, or unconsciousness, as the paramedics worked over her. But those elegant narrow fingers squeezed Lau's shorter ones, and Hafidha turned her head as if seeking. "Hey."

"Shhh," Lau said. "Lie still. Easy. Just...stay with us."

The noise Hafidha made wasn't a laugh, but it wasn't anything else either. It bubbled, and Lau had a sudden horrible memory of Melinda Grossman fighting to breathe while her chest filled up with blood, with air. Hafidha spoke in strained tones. "You remember the thing in the hotel? Sorry about that."

"You weren't yourself."

Hafidha's fingers fluttered weakly in Lau's palm. "Oh, honey. Yes I was."

Act IV

Tan got confirmation that Gates and Lau were in the ambulance and on the way to the hospital, and he checked the time. Thirty minutes since the shooting. "They're en route," he said to the idea of the team, the voices that, somewhere to the west of him, were the people he'd seen only hours ago.

He sat in Hafidha's chair, in her half-darkened room, in their empty section of the building, knowing he wasn't alone. Padma and the kids were at home. Someone was probably at work Down the Hall. The voices on the radio were living people.

But he felt as if he were lost on the surface of the moon.

"That's it for the first floor," he heard Todd say, and even through the static his voice was hard and flat.

"Tan, we're about to go up the back stairs," Falkner said.

"Copy that." Could his voice make it all the way to them? He planted both feet square on the floor and straightened in the chair. Fear wouldn't help them, not from this distance.

"Stop," said Todd. "Fourth tread, under the right-hand end."

"Got it," Brady said.

Wait, Tan thought, *Check the next--*

"And the fifth," Todd added. "Hope nobody's stiff in the hips today."

Arthur Tan came up through the bomb squad. He wanted to fucking *teleport* into that stairwell. But Solomon Todd was probably better at the job, anyway.

Still, he ought to be there.

*

"There's a classic," Todd said, savage and cheerful at once. Esther Falkner thought she knew, now, what he must have sounded like during the time before he took up journalism. "One wire at ankle height. You straighten up to step over it..." He shone his flashlight beam upward and around the corner of the hall. It caught the shadow of a second wire at shoulder height.

"Let's not do that, then."

Behind her, Brady said, "Villette. Keep an eye on our back trail. We cleared the first floor, but if he gets to the front stairs..."

"I know," Chaz replied. Once the acknowledgement would have come with an irritable edge. Not this time.

We're running out of house, Falkner thought. *Unless he wants us to climb the attic stairs... No. Stay focused on now.*

Something in her peripheral vision moved.

*

"There he is!" someone--Brady?--shouted. The white-noise burst of a shot. Tan clutched the edge of the desk, waiting.

"That room has a connecting door to the next one." That was Chaz, and not something he'd say if one of his teammates had caught a bullet.

"On three," Falkner whispered.

Gunfire, breaking glass.

"Hold your fire. *Hold your fire.*" Todd.

Tan had enough time to lean toward the mike before the three shots came.

He felt his blood pressure spike, and somehow he was standing up, a sound he couldn't identify, didn't want to identify, loud and horrible and a scream and someone yelling and he couldn't tell who, none of it making sense going on and on *you motherfucking sons of bitches what is happening there* and another shot by itself, then someone calling out "Todd" but who was it? check the recording check the gear what is happening I can't tell what is happening hit the speak button "Tan here, what is the situation?"

How was his voice so even, so calm?

Once more, "This is Tan. I need a sit report."

No one answered him.

At first he thought there was no sound, but then he heard moaning, and all he wanted out of life was to know who was making it.

Tan never consciously reconstructed the events, but somehow knew what had happened--Todd had gotten them past all the traps, one after another, until Beale finally let them get close and detonated a charge himself.

From what distance? Had he taken himself out, too? Who was alive? Who was hurt? Goddammit goddammit goddammit.

"Tan here, what is the situation?"

No answer. Just harsh, dragging breaths. And, worst of all, not enough of them.

*

Danny Brady knows he needs to open his eyes.

Open his eyes, raise the hand he can feel still curled limp and sticky around the grip of his weapon. Open his eyes.

The screaming has stopped. Whatever that last sound was--footsteps. The gamma, closing on them. Coming to make sure. Brady can hear his own breathing, the bubble of blood on his lips. There should be pain, so much pain.

But he's in shock. He can tell because his hands are cold, he can't feel his legs. All he can hear is the footsteps. And something else. A taken and held breath. Beside him.

Somebody else on the team is aware.

Chaz.

That's where Chaz was standing.

Gamma tough, and behind the soft cover of the rest of the team's bodies. Chaz is conscious. Chaz is thinking. Maybe bleeding, maybe injured. Maybe dying. But holding his breath.

Waiting.

*

Head fuzzy, left hand numb, and he can't stand up. *That which doesn't kill us*.

He can't hear anything beyond the ringing in his ears, and he can't see much beyond the stupid flashlight beams, now all pointing at different and random sections of the floor. And in their narrow glare are revealed slices of those he loves, twisted, broken, not bleeding. He doesn't have to think to know what it means that they aren't bleeding. The fractured mirror flashes out, confirms what he already knows. Still and red.

But *he* is bleeding. Good. *That which doesn't kill us.*

Movement? Yes, Brady. Brady is still alive. *Good, then*, says something that isn't real. *Saving Brady will justify doing what I'm bloody well going to do anyway*. But no. No. That isn't--

Villette, you idiot! Not now, not now. Think later.

*

Brady needs to open his eyes. He needs to raise his gun.

His eyelashes are stuck, blood or something. But he blinks, blinks hard, sees blurry light and shadows. Sees a shape bending over him, a pale face that isn't Chaz's, the glint of a shining, shining wire between two fists.

*

Chaz's left leg is under him, twisted up. Broken? Sprained? Fine? One way to find out. He puts pressure on it, and the pain travels all the way up, getting as far as his mouth before he clamps it shut. He thinks it will hold him. Good. *That which doesn't kill us*.

Do something. Do anything. He thinks of Todd saying, *It is better to be remorseful than to be room temperature.* He thinks, *But I am not going to regret this at all.*

Someone is moving toward Danny. Something shines in the figure's hands.

Someone is yelling in Chaz's ear. Arthur. Shouting for a sitrep. Chaz holds his breath again. He can't answer.

Not yet.

*

Brady convulses, brings his hand up hard from the shoulder, all his gifted and hard-won strength focused in one blow. He'll never get a shot off. The gun is a club.

He connects. Hard. He loses the gun. He hears it thump and scrape across the floor, somewhere all the way over there. *Shit*.

Beale spins back, falls on his ass and hands. Behind Brady, from where he lay half-protected by the doorframe, Chaz comes up off the floor with a roar like an enraged alligator, pistol locked in both hands, long legs swinging as he steps over Brady, kicks out, knocks Beale sprawling.

*

Chaz is on his feet, and the pain is beside the point. .40 Sig in one hand, and, miraculously, flashlight still in the other. A trial step, pain, but yes. It works. For an instant he catches Brady's eye.

Another step.

That which doesn't kill us provides us the opportunity to return fire, he thinks, and lets mirrored wings flare wide, luff and fill around him, catching crimson off of everything and shattering his image around the room as he picks up one heavy foot and the step becomes a lunge, the whimper behind his teeth becomes a howl.

*

A shot slams Brady's ears as the gamma rolls away, scrabbling, another scream--not a voice Brady knows this time. The noise Chaz is making isn't even human, and now the noise the gamma is making isn't either.

Another shot.

Brady pushes, hard. Sit up. Situpsitupsitup--

Another shot. And the room, the blood, the stink of voided bowels--it all spins away, like the time-travel animation from one of those sixties TV shows.

"Arthur," Brady whispers. "Arthur. We're fucked."

The next thing he sees is Chaz's face, close enough to kiss. Dripping blood from a broken nose, the left side of his face scoured and scraped, already swelling. "Brady. Can you hear me? Stay with me. The ambulance is coming.

Stay with me."

Act V

Every night, Esther calls. Around nine, if she can. Later or earlier, if she can't. It's the deal she and Ben made early on, half-wordlessly, as much by sympathy as through negotiation.

Tonight she didn't call.

Rebekah was just home from college, fussily refreshing finals postings. Deborah was trying on her prom dress--a beaded floor-length ivory A-line number that made her mahogany hair and olive skin glow (and Ben's heart squeeze with her incipient adulthood)--one more time.

Ben was fretfully playing solitaire and totally not sitting by the phone. All three of them should have been in bed, but Ben was well-accustomed to the largely nocturnal habits of people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine. And it's hard to sleep with a little knot of anxiety in your belly.

The doorbell--much too late for a social call--came like an electric shock. He got to it even before Deborah, which is saying something in a house with a teenage girl. She might have been afraid her prom date would catch her in the dress.

Ben paused, one hand on the lock, the other on the handle. He braced himself and glanced in the security mirror Esther had mounted outside the side light window with a screwdriver and four mismatched screws.

It was Stephen Reyes. He had his daughter, Autumn, on his hip.

Ben rested his forehead against the wood for a long second before he made himself pull the damned door open.

*

It was five thirteen in the morning, Eastern Daylight Savings Time, when Stephen Reyes walked into the Emergency Department of Mount Sinai Hospital. His reflection in the revolving door looked every bit as crisp and professional as he did not feel.

In the past six hours, he had been awakened--that was the wrong word, because it implied he had been sleeping--by Arthur Tan's dead calm voice on his cell phone. He had made three personal visits, and arranged that Ben Falkner watch Autumn for a day or two.

"We'll get her home," he'd told Ben, knowing it was bullshit. "You sit tight. We'll take care of everything."

Knowing Esther Falkner was never coming home again. Knowing that some things were too damn big and terrible to be taken care of.

He'd accepted Gray Putnam's offer of a lift on a private jet belonging to a ridiculously wealthy, ridiculously idle Putnam family friend whose not-too-distant relatives had included several Northeastern congressmen and a lieutenant governor. "After all," Gray said, red-eyed in tailored pajamas, "I'm going your way."

Gray was parking the rental. Reyes looked around. In the hushed hour of early morning, the ER was as quiet and still as ever an ER was. Somewhere, someone moaned softly. One person slumped sleeping in a plastic chair in the waiting area. Another watched the silenced TV vacantly, kept company by a little girl who looked like she'd been crying. A tall, broad woman behind the admitting desk looked up from her monitor, a game of Spider Solitaire reflecting green in her spectacles.

"May I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Stephen Reyes," he said, stepping forward. Letting his Chicago accent color his voice in ways he never would in D.C. "I'm looking for--"

"Special Agent Lau," she said, understanding. Suddenly consolatory. "She's in the surgical waiting room. Just up that way, elevator. Follow the signs."

"Somebody will be right behind me," Reyes said. He was already walking away.

Gray didn't catch up by the time he made the elevator, or by the time he found Lau. She didn't see him at first, because she was curled in a chair, head in her hands. She was still wearing her unfastened tac vest. It was sticky and brown with old blood.

"I brought you clothes," he said, and held up the duffel bag. She didn't look up.

He hadn't really expected her to.

He sat down beside her. "Civilians are going to be coming in soon."

That got her attention. Lau would think of somebody else. Somebody who might be horrified by a blood-covered FBI agent. She took the bag when he handed it to her, didn't stand. Her fingers seemed sluggish as she closed them on the strap.

"There's a bathroom across the hall," he said. "Go."

She stood up, exactly as if he had any right to tell her what to do, and went. When she returned, she wore a clean shirt, a cardigan against the air-

conditioned chill. A pair of jeans. The blood was mostly scrubbed from under her nails, and her fingertips were pink with the scrubbing.

He handed her the coffee next. He'd dumped two packets of cocoa mix into it, and she made a face when she sipped it. But her complexion looked slightly less greenish a moment later, so he guessed that the sugar was doing its work.

She dropped the duffel, heavier now with her bloody clothing and tac vest in it, beside a chair. She did not use the chair. "I should never have left them."

Reyes studied her drawn face until she hid it behind the paper cup once more. He decided on brutal honesty. "Then you'd be dead as well."

She nodded. "You're probably--"

"No probably. What would you have changed?"

"Nothing," she said. Then, "Hafidha didn't make it."

"Shit." They'd still been working on her when he got on the plane. He'd--

He hadn't actually believed...

He hadn't believed. He'd known it was possible. But he'd...

The string of titles of authority in a fistful of languages. The rainbow of tinted contact lenses. The sharp-edged jokes. All her, and not her, because they could have been part of someone who was not Hafidha Gates.

Except they weren't. Now they were gone, with her.

Sol, Esther, Hafidha. And the part of him defined by them was gone, too.

He sat very still. When the thing in his throat would let him speak without weeping, he asked, "Where's Villette?"

"Sedated, for now. Danny's still in surgery." She sipped--gulped--again, her throat working as she swallowed. "We can go in and sit with Chaz if you want. He should be awake in a couple of hours."

She'd been waiting for him, in other words. He wished he'd decided to suffer the awful hospital tea. He needed something to do with his hands. Still no Gray. Maybe the parking ramp had eaten him.

Maybe he was quite sensibly crying in the car.

"In a minute. Finish your mocha." When she looked at him quizzically, he answered the unspoken question. "We're waiting for Gray."

She winced, then looked into her cup and seemed surprised to find it empty. "Ben?"

"Home with the kids. Mehitabel went over." So had Tricia, after he called her. But he didn't think Lau needed to hear that now. "Somebody from Honolulu field office is going to have to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Gates."

The cup was still empty. Her face stilled, and he watched as she considered the intersecting ripples of tragedy rolling forth from this night's work, lapping over one another and expanding, ever expanding. "I should never have left them."

Reyes made a curt, hard gesture with his left hand. "Yeah, well. Neither should I."

*

That was fourteen shots--the Sig's whole magazine. Wasn't it? He was under pressure. Even he might have lost track. Maybe it was fifteen. There might be one more.

No, the striker hits nothing. It was seventeen. Well, that's that, then. Walk out. Forget he knows what steel and polymer taste like.

He doesn't know if that happened, either. Maybe he's only imagining the smell of smoke up close, and the taste.

The ruling "good shoot" is such a curious judgement. "Good" isn't the word he'd use.

But. No, the slide locks open when the gun is empty. If there had been any more bullets, he would have known.

He would have known.

So it's not real.

It didn't happen.

It's just a dream.

And he'll keep telling himself that until he nearly believes it.

Memory is just a story we tell ourselves. It has very little relationship to objective reality.

You won't win, Bug.

I won't let you.

Someone squeezed his fingers. Insistently.

Chaz opened his eyes. Focused through the familiar sedative haze. Found Lau's face, Reyes behind her. Felt a rush of terrible apprehensive relief--

The mirror was a reflex now; easier to reach out and feel the answer to his question than to open his mouth and ask. So he reached out--

And read the answer staining Nikki's expression before he ever felt it staining her heart.

*

"Well," said Bear, "I never expected--" and stopped. He had been about to say "--to see the two of you be first on board," but then he saw the look on the faces of Special Agents Lau and Villette. Or, rather, the lack of expression. Villette's non-expression was the gift wrap on a whole lot of swelling, lacerations, and bruises.

He stood beside the gantry stairs, one hand on the rail, and his heart gave a thump. He said, "What--?"

"You didn't hear," said Lau, making it a statement. "We're your only passengers this trip."

"Unless you count the body bags," said Villette, cold, and distant, and it was like he was being intentionally hurtful, because if he'd been anything else, Bear thought, he'd have broken down.

"Who--"

"Brady's going to make it," said Lau. "He's still in the ICU," she added in the tone an air traffic controller used when you called in a Mayday.

"Esther?" said Bear.

Lau shook her head and they went up past Bear. They sat down next to each other. They didn't hold hands.

Half an hour later, Bear had to supervise the stowing of the body bags. Black. Featureless. He touched each one softly, a kind of benediction.

His payload.

It was another hour before he felt able to fly.

*

Nikki sat on the front of the bare desk, in the emptied office. No one had moved into it after Reyes retired; everyone was used to things as they were, after all. The way they'd never be again.

She could have sat behind this desk, but it wasn't that kind of conversation.

She'd thought for an instant about doing this in the office next door, which still had amenities like lamps. And books and framed documents and family

photos and a spare jacket on the hook on the back of the door. So she only thought about it for an instant. She could hardly bear to go into that room; it would be worse for him.

He stood looking out what used to be Reyes's window as if there were something to see, instead of Foggy Bottom's air-water mixture. His arms crossed his chest, his long, big-boned hands hooked over his shoulders. A breastplate, not a hug. Where there's no comfort, there can at least be armor.

She laid the manila folder on her knees, but didn't open it. "Frost's autopsy of the subject," she said. Her voice bounced back from the bare walls. The report had arrived by courier, along with a condolence card. Because Madeleine Frost was nothing if she was not proper.

He nodded as if at something else.

"Cause of death" --other than thirteen torso shots that would have killed him more slowly-- "was the gunshot at very close range between the eyebrows." Like an execution.

This time he didn't bother to nod. His face was as empty as the office, lit with the same gray, cold light. It would fill up again with something, but she had no idea what it would be, or how long it would take.

"There'll be an inquiry. And this is going to look... It'll make IA nervous. Sympathetic, but nervous. You should know what you're going to say."

She heard him breathe out; his chin came up a little, and his mouth pressed thin. "I submitted my resignation."

To be shot in the chest; to catch the force of explosion in the breastbone--it would feel like that. "No."

His head turned and his eyes focused on her.

"Not-- Are you insane? Not now. Chaz, you can't leave now."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, bullshit you're sorry. Tell me you're making a really lousy joke."

He unfolded his arms and let them hang slack, as if he didn't know what they were good for. "I can't stay, Nikki. I can't stay and put it all back together and lose it again in five or ten or however many years. I can't do it."

She wanted to say, *You won't lose it*. But not so long ago she would have said that, and believed it. Maybe he would have believed it, too. It turned out not to be true. "You're grieving. Your head's not straight. This is not the time to make this decision."

"Sure it is. If I wait, I might forget--how this feels. I did once. False sense of security. Now is exactly the time."

"At least stay long enough to train a couple people from Down the Hall. Chaz, we're it. You, me, and Art. We're the unit. Don't make me do this by myself."

His eyes dropped, and he smiled faintly. "You can do it by yourself, you know. You'll find what you need, and you'll pick the right people. Pete, if you can shift him. Go get Saul Zingermann: he'd be great. He's too ambitious for Minneapolis homicide. And he's still young enough to make the age cutoff for Fibbie hiring. You'll do a good job."

She drew breath to tell him off, to insist he stay, to beg. But he was gone already. She could see it; should have when he came in the door. She'd seen him tested and weak and stretched so thin light came through him. But he'd had fight in him. Now the fierce brittle thing that pushed him forward was broken.

"Have you been to see Brady?" she asked instead, and didn't realize until his eyes squeezed closed that she'd known it would hurt and that she'd done it on purpose. Some profiler.

"How is he?"

"They moved him to Johns Hopkins," she said, rich with irony. "Still in the ICU." He stared at her until she said, "No. Too much damage. He won't walk."

A shudder twitched the cloth across his shoulders. "Right."

"You should go see him," she said, gentler.

"So his survivor guilt and mine can meet up? There's a marriage made in hell. Do you know what he'd say to me?"

"No. And neither do you."

He smiled, a hard expression; his weight shifted, his shoulders squared, his head straightened on his neck. "'Oh, look. This time everybody dies and Villette walks away without a scratch.'" He said it in Brady's voice. Her stomach clenched.

"No, he wouldn't." Maybe he would. But he wouldn't mean it, not for long. Brady was like that. And Chaz knew it--ah, of course. Brady's voice, but it wasn't Brady talking.

Forgiveness was a process, and took too long. Chaz would be out of reach by the time it started. He was out of reach now.

"What will you do?" She knew it was an admission of defeat.

He shrugged. "Something else. Somewhere else." The expression that crossed his face looked painful. "Search and rescue. Short-order cook. Sherpa. I'm a man of many talents."

She looked down at the folder; she'd forgotten that was what she clamped between her fingers. When she'd carried it into the office, she'd thought this would be a different conversation.

"Nikki?"

She looked up.

"You really don't need me. But if someday you do? I'll come back."

"How will I find you to tell you so?"

He smiled, lightning and sorrow and kindness. "Hello? Supervisory Special Agent Nicolette Lau? You'll find me."

Two steps; then he stopped and touched her hand. It didn't last long enough for her to turn her palm up and close her fingers over his. He went out the door and shut it behind him.

Oh, god. No, she could cry later, at home. That, she realized, was what the woman who'd sat at the desk in the next office had told herself, again and again.

Lau put her grief away, to unpack and study later. There was too much work to do.

*

Somebody was knocking, but Chaz had no intention of getting up and opening the door. Whoever it was had a pretty good hand with a lockpick, though, because after fifteen minutes of steady knocking and calling there was about five minutes of scratching, and then the door clicked open.

By then, Chaz had recognized the voice. He didn't get off the couch or lift his head.

"Chaz."

"Dice."

"Shit, man, you gotta eat. You must be down ten pounds already. I brought--lunch, I brought lunch."

The Bug growled with hunger. Chaz wasn't in any mood to give it what it wanted.

"Chaz. What would Daphne say?"

"Fuck you," Chaz said. But when Dice started lifting leftovers containers out of the greasy bag, he took the first one and a plastic fork. Takeout from the pub Dice worked at. Probably cleaned out the fridge at the end of his shift.

Chaz ate, because it was easier than arguing--and the more he ate, the easier it got. Finally, his stomach hurt too much to take another bite.

He looked up at Dice.

Dice gave him a bottle of Guinness that Chaz hadn't seen him open.

"I'm a bartender," Dice said. "Talk."

Chaz took it. He drew a line through condensation with a fingertip.

Dice pulled another one from the bag by his feet and opened it.

"I don't know what to do," Chaz said. "I can't do this any more."

Dice nodded. "I know what that feels like."

"Yeah, I bet you do." The stout tasted malty and rich, bittersweet. "Somebody else can hold your rope, but you have to do the climb." It took him a little while to get up the courage to ask,"So how'd you deal with it?"

Dice shrugged. It set his piercings swaying. "Did something else."

"It hurts."

"Yeah," Dice said. He pushed his broken hand--more mobile now, with therapy--into his side below the ribs. He swigged beer. "You know what we say when it hurts?"

Chaz snorted. "Pain is only weakness leaving the body until you're twenty-five."

"Riders say, 'Fuck you. Get hard.'"

"'Be strong to be useful?' I don't feel much of either right now."

"Hey, I've got something for you. From Geraldine. Todd's P.A.? She said Mehitabel said Todd wanted you to have it. If...if anything happened. You know."

Chaz closed his eyes, bit his tongue. When he opened his lids again, a devil duckie key fob was sitting on the coffee table.

"She said Todd said you'd know what to do with it."

"He used to carry this everywhere," Chaz said. "Hafidha gave it to--"

He looked at Dice. Dice nodded. Chaz wedged the Guinness between his

knees--it made his bones ache--and picked the thing up. It took him less than twenty seconds to figure out the twist that exposed a USB plug.

"Fuck," Chaz said. "It's a flash drive."

He laid it on the table, where it reflected in the glass. The contacts in its belly touched a little puddle of condensation. The LEDs inside began to cycle red, blue, violet, green.

"Fuck you," Dice said. "Get hard."

He held the bottle out by the neck.

"Do something different," Chaz said, and clicked Dice's bottle with his own.

*

Rosemary Brady heard the voices from the hall, and so she had a suspicion before she walked into the hospital room how it was going to be. But it didn't matter. She had the bit in her teeth now, and she was going to do what she should have done years before.

So when she and Jim walked in past the privacy screen, rapping on the doorframe and calling cheerfully, she wasn't surprised to see a dark-haired handsome man lean back from the bedside as if he'd been caught out. Danny's hand was still raised, reaching for him.

Rosemary almost heard the comic-book screech as Jim set his heels. That didn't matter either. Because Danny was lying there somehow diminished and scared, when he was as big and bronze a man as his father, and she couldn't bear to see him looking small.

Rosemary Gilmer Brady was no small woman herself, and she made herself as big as possible when she marched up to the bedside and stuck out her hand. "You must be Gray Putnam," she said. "I'm your mother-in-law."

Danny choked and started coughing. Behind her, Jim started to say something that was about to turn into "Now just wait a cotton-pickin' minute--"

"I'll go," Gray said, standing. He looked it--gray, she meant--all gray around the edges like somebody who hadn't slept in days, or eaten, and it made Rosemary's heart ache.

"You will sit right there, young man." She was still holding out her hand, and as she'd guessed from the shine on his shoes, he was too well brought up not to take it.

Into that space of time, Jim said, "Rosemary--"

She turned, still clutching Gray's hand, and she looked her husband in the eye.

Nobody was ever going to say that Pearl Gilmer's little girl backed down when her own son needed her. "James Patrick Brady," she said, "you are going to listen to me. Our son is lying in a hospital bed, and all you can do is complain that he has somebody who loves him and wants to take care of him? I am ashamed of you."

He'd puffed up, all right. But before her eyes, she watched him deflating. And taking a breath. And saying, "I'll just go get a cup of coffee, then--"

All three of them spoke at once: "Dad--" "Jim--" "Mr. Brady--"

--but it was Gray who kept talking. "Mr. Brady. How about if I go get you a cup of coffee? I think your son wants to see you, sir."

"Two sugars," Rosemary said as he headed for the door without giving anybody time to collect their thoughts. "Easy on the cream."

She thought he must have caught her conspiratorial wink by the way he smiled.

*

After Dice left--he offered to stay over on the couch, but Chaz didn't want him knowing that Chaz was sleeping in Hafidha's room, could only sleep in Hafidha's room, if you could call it sleeping--Chaz watered the plants. Because it would be ridiculous to let them die now, after everything. He picked a dead leaf off the Cuban oregano, then a live one, and put the latter in his mouth.

It tasted like once upon a time.

He went downstairs to his computer, because all of Hafidha's were useless to him. He flipped the slender MacBook open and plugged the devil duckie key fob in. It flashed again, circling lights in seven colors. The drive's contents filled his screen.

Chaz opened a file marked Notes-synthesis at random, flicked to the middle, and began reading.

*...seems likely that Hakes drew his inspiration as much from horror films and games (*Andromeda Strain*?* Resident Evil*?) as from the medical literature. However, under the influence of his mother's obsession, he did grow up absolutely steeped in medical terminology, etc. Compulsive behavior (hers/his). Attention-seeking (hers/his). He talks to us because we're literally the only contact he has.*

Contrast McCain. No need for public recognition. Entirely internalized--despite the fact that the motivating force arises from his rejection by his father/brother. Attachment disorder? Profoundness of lack of self-worth: he

thinks he is a poison so he becomes one. (attached file, notes and photographs of supporting documentation. Newspaper reports, missing persons, his brother's "miraculous" cures. Power of suggestion. Power of self-suggestion.)

McCain's medical knowledge much less than Hakes, though general knowledge base broader.

(attached documentation, Hakes childhood medical records, reports of sessions with Reyes, others. Reyes post-incident medical report. Hadn't seen that knee X-ray before. Ow, Steve. Ow.)

Chaz bit his thumb, took a breath, and opened another file at random. This one was named *Chapter 17.*

Chapter 17: UNDERWORLD

(rough only)

In the summer of 1972, I was nineteen years old. The same age, it turns out, as Michael Dominic Bellamo. But while I was between semesters at Penn State--and soon to leave it for a career change I'm still legally bound not to discuss--Michael Bellamo was embarking on his own education as a serial killer.

He hadn't yet graduated: his first known stranger murder would not be committed until January 15th, 1975. But on June 1st, 1972, he matriculated.

The FBI became involved in the case in 2012, a year and a half after his death...

"Fuck me," Chaz breathed. "Of course Duke was writing a book."

It was late. Really late; he knew without glancing at the clock, because he usually knew.

His hand went out and picked up his phone. He dialed without looking. It was answered on the second ring by a groggy voice, sweet with sleep.

He'd made the right choice. He could still regret it on occasion.

"Tasha," he said. "I need just one more favor."

She laughed in his ear. "It's never just one more, Spider-Man."

*

Reyes stood in the open door of his apartment and watched Chaz Villette stalk away down the hall. His shoulder blades were visible in outline under his cotton shirt. Reyes was glad there'd been leftover *ropa vieja* and rice in the fridge.

He felt old, and helpless. He'd wanted this to happen for so long that it had become his equivalent of "Next year in Jerusalem"--the thing you said with every intention of making it a reality, while knowing it never would be.

But now it would be. Reyes had always been too old and too tied to the consequences to do it, that was all. It was someone else's job.

He could almost hear Solomon Todd's annoying chuckle. "Oh, like you've never suffered from conflicting emotions," he said to it, and to the empty air.

*

Gray was sleeping in his chair, which was just fine with Danny. The worry lines in Gray's face had smoothed out, and his hair was tousled.

After they'd moved Danny from the ICU to Acute Care, Danny had tried to scare Gray off with stories of how it was going to be, living with a cripple. He'd laughed in Danny's face. Then he'd stared at Brady patiently, with big dog eyebrows, until Brady stopped talking.

Then he'd snorted and said, "It's a good thing we moved into your place instead of my apartment. No stairs."

Now, Danny just wanted to look at him. Look at him, and not think too much about the funerals he'd be missing, the ones Gray would have to go to in his place.

He pulled the weird white TV over on its awkward arm and turned it on, muted so it wouldn't wake up Gray. He flipped through the channels, looking for a soap opera or something equally risible. He would have gone right past the news--he didn't want to know--except a familiar gangling body ensconced in a blue-upholstered horseshoe chair arrested his stabbing finger.

He fumbled for the volume control just in time to catch Chaz's tenor voice answering a question. "...in 2002, the federal government established a secret FBI task force under Supervisory Special Agent Dr. Stephen Reyes, specializing in tracking down crimes committed by individuals under the influence of this phenomenon, which we referred to as the anomaly. I was one of the agents involved."

The camera shifted briefly to the host. "Can you tell our viewers something about what the 'anomaly' is, exactly?"

"Well--" Chaz grimaced, his familiar thinking-Muppet face.

Brady's chest seized. Distantly, he wondered if he were having a heart attack. Wouldn't that beat all?

"We are not entirely certain of the mechanism, frankly. But over the last

twelve years, the Anomalous Crimes Task Force and related professionals have at least developed a good set of metrics for how it works, how to identify it, and how it's spread. I can tell you that it's extraordinarily rare. Chances are you will never meet someone affected by the anomaly." Chaz smiled disarmingly. The camera loved his fucking cheekbones. "Unless you meet me."

Brady found control of his hands--at least *they* still fucking worked--and shook Gray's elbow, hard. Gray awoke with a start. Brady gestured frantically for his cell phone, and Gray handed it over. Then he caught sight of what was on the television, and what little color remained in his patrician face drained right down his neck.

Brady hit speed dial with shaking hands, waited through a ring.

Nikki said, "Danny, you should be--"

"Nik, shut up. And for the love of God, turn on the news."

"Danny."

"Do it."

"Do it," Gray said over his shoulder, aimed toward the phone. Nikki must have heard it, because she stopped arguing mid-word. He heard typing; of course she was in the office, in front of her computer. She'd grab a live stream.

She gasped into the phone.

Gray grabbed Danny's shoulder this time. He gestured back to the TV.

Danny's jaw actually dropped as an announcer he didn't recognize said, "In a related story, we now take you live to a press conference with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, for reaction to recent revelations concerning the secret prison facility maintained by the United States government in Virginia--"

"Fuck, Nikki," he breathed into the phone. "I gotta go. I gotta call Chaz up right the fuck now and tell him to get his ass to fucking Croatia."

There was a banging on the other end of the line, the sound of a door slamming open. An angry voice Danny recognized as that of Victor Celentano.

"I'm sorry, Danny. I didn't hear you," Nikki said. "I've got to run. Get well soon."

*

Charles Travis Villette got up out of his chair. He unclipped the microphone from his collar. He said *thank you* to the techs and the sound girl and the

makeup guy and the World Famous Television Personality. He wiped the pancake makeup off his face with cold cream, fighting back a stabbing memory of three dead women brought on by the scent.

His phone, silenced, buzzed against his hip. A text message from Gray Putnam, which meant from Danny.

He glanced at it anyway, even though he already knew.

As he walked out the door, eight FBI agents--Pete Pauley, Lisa Marshall, Gordon Francis, Marion Hastings, Stanley Murchison, Arthur Tan, Victor Celentano, and a green-faced Nicolette Lau--were walking in.

Murchison actually brushed his sleeve. He had to stop himself from reaching out and pushing Lau's hair off her cheek.

Not one of them saw him leave.

He turned and watched them out of sight, into the building. He held his breath, then made himself let it out again. He had to breathe. It would be all right, he told himself. Breathing came first. He just had to remember to breathe.

*

The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters.

--Antonio Gramsci

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Notes

[←1]

Significant portions of Bellamo's diaries have been excerpted and may be read in *Sex-Related Homicide and Death Investigation: Practical and Clinical Perspectives* by Vernon Geberth, 3rd edition, CRC Press, forthcoming 2015 (in press as of this writing)

[←2]

Per recollections of S.A. Charles Villette, as discussed in Ch. 1.

[←3]

From my own notes. Unattributed conversations in this chapter are reconstructed from a combination of sources, and are subject to the usual errors and infelicities of eyewitness testimony.

[←4]

The name of this underage person has been changed to protect her privacy

[←5]

naming the UNSUB from Boston discussed in Chapter 14

[←6]

The alias-Henry-Clark and Guy Nadon cases, respectively in Paine Lake MN and Danville VT, January 2008. Discussed in Chapter 10

[←7]

Arthur Tan's Bureau nickname

[←8]

Eyewitness accounts are what they are, and that means unreliable. While I have reviewed the tapes and transcripts of Tan's interview of Fisher, I can say with certainty that everybody who was present that day--me, Agent Tan, Agent Gates, Detective Ruiz, and Ms. Fisher herself--would give a different version of events. What follows is my own subjective interpretation of events. As, I suppose, is everything within these pages--but somehow in the case of a minor child who had already suffered so much, I find I need to make an even finer distinction than usual.

[←9]

The FBI owes a great burden of gratitude to crime scene forensics television. As with profiling, the science is presented as so infallible in the public media that the mythology itself serves us as a lever in interrogations.